Leo Strauss

Basic Principles of Classical Political Philosophy (Aristotle)

A course offered in the autumn quarter, 1961
The Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago

Edited by M. Richard Zinman

M. Richard Zinman is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus at James Madison College, Michigan State University. He is co–editor and contributor to a series of books published by the Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy at Michigan State University, the first of which is *Technology in the Western Political Tradition* (1993) and the most recent is *Are Markets Moral?* (2018). He has been writing about Leo Strauss since graduate school. Related to this transcript, see his unpublished dissertation, "The Discovery of Moral Virtue: A Discussion of Aristotle's Founding of Political Science in the Form of a Commentary on the Interpretation of Leo Strauss" (Claremont Graduate School, 1976).

With assistance from Stephanie Ahrens and Bradley Jackson

© 2020 The Estate of Leo Strauss. All Rights Reserved.

Table of Contents

Editorial Headnote i

Note on the Leo Strauss Transcript Project i-iii

Session 1: Introduction, parts 1 and 2 1-19

Part 1: Our predicament and its root

A. the predicament: the crisis of our time, the crisis of modern political philosophy, and the crisis of present-day social science — we have become uncertain of our purpose

B. its root: present-day social science admits the primacy of the commonsense understanding of political things but cannot provide an account of that commonsense understanding

Part 2: Strauss's approach to our predicament: the necessary but tentative or experimental return to the original form of political science, Aristotle's political science, which contains such an understanding.

Why return from present-day social science to Aristotle rather than to modern political philosophy?

1. modern philosophy's break with classical philosophy — the crisis ofour time has it origins in that break

2. the characteristic differences between Aristotle's philosophy and modern philosophy

Session 2: Introduction, part 2 continued 20-37

3. modern philosophy, especially political philosophy, paved the way for present-day social science, especially political science

4. the characteristic differences between Aristotle's political science and present-day political science

Session 3: Introduction, part 3 38-41

The obstacles to the recovery of Aristotle's political science: positivism

Session 4: Positivism continued 42-68

Session 5: Introduction, part 3 69-88

The obstacles to the recovery of Aristotle's political science: historicism

Session 6: Historicism continued 89-110

Session 7: Historicism continued 111-137

Critique of R. G. Collingwood's historicism

Session 8: Strauss's subject matter proper 138-160

The quest for a more adequate understanding of Aristotle's political science

A. Strauss's provisional contention: Aristotle's *Politics* contains the coherent and comprehensive understanding of political things because it contains the original form of political science, the form in which political science is nothing other than the fully conscious form of the commonsense understanding of political things.

B. the objections to this contention and Strauss's responses:

1. The matrix of Aristotle's political science is not common sense simply but the common sense of the Greeks — Aristotle's understanding of the city (*polis*) as natural

Session 9: The objections continued 161-181

2. Aristotle's political science is profoundly anti-democratic — Aristotle's understanding of natural inequality

Session 10: The objections continued 182-202

3. Aristotle's political science is based on a view of the whole which is "optimistic" —Aristotle's understanding of nature as a positive standard

Session 11: Digression 203-222

Strauss's correction of his response to the first objection: the theme of Aristotle's political science is not the city (*polis*) but the regime (*politeia*) — the primacy of the regime; critique of Eric Voegelin's interpretation of Aristotle

Session 12: Digression continued 223-244

The core of Aristotle's political science is the analysis of the various regimes with a view to discovering the regime which is best by nature everywhere and always — the basic difficulty of Aristotle's teaching about the best regime and the radical defect of Aristotle's political science

Session 13: The objections continued 245-263

4. According to the traditional view, it was not Aristotle but Socrates who originated political philosophy or political science; and according to the present-day view, it was not Aristotle but the sophists who originated political philosophy or political science

a. the distinction between political thought and political philosophy

b. the discovery of nature and the distinction between nature and convention

c. Aristotle's understanding of nature

Session 14: The objections continued 264-271

d. the pre-Socratics' understanding of the distinction between nature and convention and the political skill

e. the sophists' understanding of the distinction between nature and convention and the political skill

Session 15: The objections continued 272-287

f. Plato's Athenian Stranger's understanding and critique of his predecessors
g. Aristotle's understanding and critique of his predecessors: the sophists
h. Aristotle's understanding and critique of his predecessors: Hippodamus

Session 16: The objections continued 288-311

i. Aristotle's discovery of moral virtue and his founding of political science

Editorial Headnote

The editor's introduction to this transcript is forthcoming.

This course was taught in a lecture format, with Strauss allowing time for student questions and his responses. The text assigned for the course was *The Politics of Aristotle* (1946), edited and translated by Ernest Barker. When passages from the text were read aloud in class, this transcript records the words as they appear in *The Politics of Aristotle*. Original spelling has been retained. Citations are included for all passages read aloud.

There are no surviving audiotapes of this course. This transcript is based upon the original transcript, made by persons unknown to us. The quality of the audiotapes was in some cases unreliable. Sessions 2, 3, 14, and 15 are cut short because the audiotape was too defective for the transcriber to proceed. In cases where portions of the audiotape are inaudible or impossible to discern, the transcriber inserted ellipses. These have been retained. In some cases the editor has supplied what he thought was the missing word or phrase. These insertions are enclosed in brackets. The original transcript can be consulted in the Leo Strauss Archive in Special Collections in the University of Chicago Library.

At the start of many sessions, a footnote number appears after the date of the course meeting. The corresponding footnotes, added by the editor, refer the reader to some of Strauss's published works. During these sessions Strauss makes use of a work in progress or refers or alludes to his already-published works, and for the editor it is important to provide notes to them because this is one of the very few courses (perhaps the only course) in which Strauss seems to be reading from soon-to-be-published manuscripts.

This transcript was edited by M. Richard Zinman, with assistance from Stephanie Ahrens, Bradley Jackson, and Gayle McKeen.

The Leo Strauss Transcript Project

Leo Strauss is well known as a thinker and writer, but he also had tremendous impact as a teacher. In the transcripts of his courses one can see Strauss comment on texts, including many he wrote little or nothing about, and respond generously to student questions and objections. The transcripts, amounting to more than twice the volume of Strauss's published work, will add immensely to the material available to scholars and students of Strauss's work.

In the early 1950s mimeographed typescripts of student notes of Strauss's courses were distributed among his students. In winter 1954, the first recording, of his course on Natural Right, was transcribed and distributed to students. Professor Herbert J. Storing

obtained a grant from the Relm Foundation to support the taping and transcription, which resumed on a regular basis in the winter of 1956 with Strauss's course "Historicism and Modern Relativism." Of the 39 courses Strauss taught at the University of Chicago from 1958 until his departure in 1968, 34 were recorded and transcribed. After he retired from Chicago, recording of his courses continued at Claremont Men's College in the spring of 1968 and the fall and spring of 1969 (although the tapes for his last two courses there have not been located), and at St. John's College for the four years until his death in October 1973.

The surviving original audio recordings vary widely in quality and completeness, and after they had been transcribed, the audiotapes were sometimes reused, leaving the audio record very incomplete. Beginning in the late 1990s, Stephen Gregory, then the administrator of the University's John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy funded by the John M. Olin Foundation, initiated the digital remastering of the surviving tapes by Craig Harding of September Media to ensure their preservation, improve their audibility, and make possible their eventual publication. This remastering received financial support from the Olin Center and from the Division of Preservation and Access of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The remastered audiofiles are available at the Strauss Center website: https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/courses.

Strauss permitted the taping and transcribing to go forward, but he did not check the transcripts or otherwise participate in the project. Accordingly, Strauss's close associate and colleague Joseph Cropsey originally put the copyright in his own name, though he assigned copyright to the Estate of Leo Strauss in 2008. Beginning in 1958 a headnote was placed at the beginning of each transcript, which read: "This transcription is a written record of essentially oral material, much of which developed spontaneously in the classroom and none of which was prepared with publication in mind. The transcription is made available to a limited number of interested persons, with the understanding that no use will be made of it that is inconsistent with the private and partly informal origin of the material. Recipients are emphatically requested not to seek to increase the circulation of the transcription. This transcription has not been checked, seen, or passed on by the lecturer." In 2008, Strauss's heir, his daughter Jenny Strauss, asked Nathan Tarcov to succeed Joseph Cropsey as Strauss's literary executor. They agreed that because of the widespread circulation of the old, often inaccurate and incomplete transcripts and the continuing interest in Strauss's thought and teaching, it would be a service to interested scholars and students to proceed with publication of the remastered audiofiles and transcripts. They were encouraged by the fact that Strauss himself signed a contract with Bantam Books to publish four of the transcripts although in the end none were published.

The University's Leo Strauss Center, established in 2008, launched a project, presided over by its director Nathan Tarcov, and managed by Stephen Gregory, to correct the old transcripts on the basis of the remastered audiofiles as they became available, transcribe those audiofiles not previously transcribed, and annotate and edit for readability all the transcripts including those for which no audiofiles survived. This project was supported by grants from the Winiarski Family Foundation, Mr. Richard S. Shiffrin and Mrs.

Barbara Z. Schiffrin, Earhart Foundation, and the Hertog Foundation, and contributions from numerous other donors. The Strauss Center was ably assisted in its fundraising efforts by Nina Botting-Herbst and Patrick McCusker, staff in the Office of the Dean of the Division of the Social Sciences at the University.

Senior scholars familiar with both Strauss's work and the texts he taught were commissioned as editors, with preliminary work done in most cases by student editorial assistants. The goal in editing the transcripts has been to preserve Strauss's original words as much as possible while making the transcripts easier to read. Strauss's impact (and indeed his charm) as a teacher is revealed in the sometimes informal character of his remarks. Readers should make allowance for the oral character of the transcripts. There are careless phrases, slips of the tongue, repetitions, and possible mistranscriptions. However enlightening the transcripts are, they cannot be regarded as the equivalent of works that Strauss himself wrote for publication.

Nathan Tarcov
Editor-in-Chief

Gayle McKeen
Managing Editor

August 2014

Basic Principles of Classical Philosophy: Aristotle

Session 1: October 2, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: What I mean [by classical political philosophy] is the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the medieval political philosophers. It is a historical thing, but I shall not treat it from a historian's point of view. I will explain first the point of view. You all have heard and are hearing every day of the crisis of our time. I plan to start from that crisis, and I think that without our awareness of it we lack the incentive for the serious study of classical politics. Now what is that crisis? That crisis was diagnosed in 1917 by Spengler[ii] as the decline of the West. Now what did he mean by that? He understood by the West one culture among a small number of high cultures. But the West was for Spengler more than just one culture among a number of cultures: it was for him the comprehensive culture. In the first place, it was the only culture which was concerned with the sympathetic understanding of all cultures and which did not reject all other cultures as so many forms of barbarism. Therefore, the West was the only culture which had acquired full consciousness of what culture means.

Originally, culture meant *the* culture of *the* human mind and hence implied [that] there can be only one culture of the human mind. There can be all kinds of wrong cultures, but they wouldn't deserve to be called cultures. Now Spengler presupposes the modern meaning of culture, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century meaning according to which culture necessarily implies that there is a variety of cultures. Grammatically speaking, [it implies] that the term "culture" can be used in the plural. But precisely because the West was thought to be the culture in which culture reaches full clarity about itself, the West is the final culture. All other cultures were genuine cultures but did not know what culture is. The West had learned to know that. Since the Western culture is the final culture, the decline of the West is identical with the final exhaustion of the very possibility of high culture. The human possibilities are exhausted.

But the human possibilities cannot be exhausted as long as there are still human tasks of the highest order.[1] In other words, as long as the fundamental riddles which confront man have not been solved to the extent to which they can be solved, [human possibilities will not be exhausted]. We may therefore provisionally say that Spengler's implicit[2] and crucial presupposition is untrue. Our science considers itself as susceptible of infinite progress, and this claim would not make sense, it seems, if the fundamental riddles were

---

[i] See Leo Strauss, "An Epilogue," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968, 1995), 203-23. Originally published in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 305-27. See also Strauss, *The City and Man* (New York: Rand McNally, 1964), 1-12.

[ii] Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), German historian and cultural theorist best known for *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922).

solved. If science is susceptible of infinite progress, there cannot be a meaningful end of human history. Human history is unfinishable. There can only be catastrophic interruption from without. And yet in one sense Spengler has proved to be right: a decline of the West has taken place. Incidentally, the title of Spengler's book in the German original[iii] does not sufficiently come out in English. A more literal translation would mean something in between "the setting of the West," just like the setting of the sun,[3] "the destruction of the West." But this only in passing.

But a decline of the West surely has taken place, for we only have to look at the shift in the global balance of power since 1900. Around 1900, the West[4]—in fact, this country together with Great Britain and Germany—could have laid down the law for the rest of the globe. Surely for at least a century the West controlled the whole globe. Today, so far from ruling the globe, permit me[5] [to remind] you[6] that the West is endangered in its very existence by the East: by the technology of the East, its numbers, its anti-Western passions. For the West was quite unaware of the power of anti-Western resentment in the world. In the *Communist Manifesto* the victory of communism had been described as a victory of the West over the East. Marx and Engels thought that the German and French working class, and the British working class too, being heirs to the French Revolution, to German philosophy, and to British industry, being heirs therefore to the peak of the political and intellectual life of the West, were the carriers of the Western tradition as a whole, and that therefore the victory of communism would mean the victory of the most mature Western thought and action over the East. Now we begin to see that the victory of communism may mean indeed the victory of originally Western science and technology, but will surely mean at the same time the abandonment of everything which distinguished Western[7] [liberalism] from Eastern despotism.

Yet however much the power of the West may have declined, however great the dangers to the West may be, that decline, that danger, nay, the defeat, even the destruction of the West would not necessarily constitute a crisis of the West: the West could go down in glory, certain of its purpose, with guns blazing and flags flying. The crisis of the West consists in the fact that the West itself has become uncertain of its purpose. This implies that once the West was certain of its purpose as a purpose in which all men could be united. We[8] [no] longer have a clear image of our future. Some of us even despair of the future, and this despair may go a long way toward explaining phenomena like beatniks and juvenile delinquency. By what I said, I do not mean that no society can be healthy unless it is dedicated to a universal purpose, to a purpose in which all men can be united—a society can be tribal and yet healthy; yet a society which was accustomed to think in terms of universal purpose cannot lose faith in that universal purpose without becoming completely disoriented. And we certainly find such a universal purpose in our immediate past; for example, in certain official statements made during the Second World War and after. These statements merely reproduce in telescoped form a vision which has been operative for some centuries—the modern centuries. In the center of that vision stands the figure of science. This modern science was to be no longer like the old science, contemplative and proud, but active and charitable. It was to be in the service of the relief of man's estate. It was to enable man to become the master and owner of nature

[iii] *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*.

through [the] intellectual conquest of nature. By bringing about universal plenty, it was to make it possible that everyone could get his share in all of the advantages of society. It was to bring about the just society: a universal society of free and equal men and women, a society in which each can develop all of his faculties to the full, in such a way that the development of each will be in perfect harmony with the development of everyone else. There[9] [had] been some doubts[10] [about] that universal purpose before, but with the coming of the atomic bomb and its progeny, this doubt has become very widespread, and affects I believe every one of us. To put it briefly, instead of the universal just society, to be made possible by universal affluence, by the abolition of misery, we are now confronted with a misery greater than any earlier misery: the misery of a possible destruction of the human race by the means of that science which seemed to promise the abolition of misery.

A certain doubt of the modern enterprise is indicated, and this doubt doesn't have to be spread from any [university department] chairs. It is very common; you can find it in the daily papers. There is also a common solution to it which is suggested, and that is to fall back on our "Western heritage," on the "Western tradition."[iv] But this solution is of very doubtful value. What is the meaning of the Western tradition? Is it a kind of tribalism, so that other nations fall back on their traditions and there is no possibility of a genuine understanding? We must never for one moment forget that the Western tradition in its inspiration and in its goal was not Western: it claimed to have a message for all men. That it originated in the West was in a way accidental to the Western tradition.

But another consideration which we must also not forget, although it might seem to some of you to be somewhat academic: this Western tradition, underlying and preceding the modern scientific development, is characterized by an antagonism within itself. The Western tradition, if we go beneath the surface, speaks with two different and even opposed tongues. The Western tradition has two roots, as you learn in every elementary course in Western civilization: it has a biblical root and it has a Greek root. These two roots are not only different but opposite. If they are well understood, the one is incompatible with the other. So I want to indicate to you only that this return to the Western tradition is not such a simple thing as some of our contemporaries seem to believe.

I summarize what I have said by this commonsensical formula. We are in a predicament which is entirely novel and we do not have a recipe. In this situation we are beginners. In this posture we turn to classical[11] [political philosophy] in order to see whether there is not some light coming from there which might ultimately show us the way. This much about the general intention of the course.

Now I approximate my theme a bit more closely by repeating what I said in a more technical manner, namely, by speaking about political theory today—not the broad thing called the crisis of our time, but our specialty within a specialty, a wheel within a wheel, political theory within the department of political science. Now what is the situation there? There is an area of agreement within present-day political science, at least in this

[iv] Quotation marks appear in original transcript.

country. In the first place, I think it is now universally admitted that theory is necessary. The view which occurred quite frequently in the nineteenth century—*facts*, facts, not theories[12]—has become silent in our age because now it is admitted (for different reasons, but I think by everyone) that you cannot get at any facts without theory. The second point regarding which there is universal agreement is this: theory cannot be ideology. An ideology, whatever else it might mean, is a doctrine which is not theoretically defensible or demonstrable. It cannot be the function of political theory to bolster morale, for example. This is a very limited agreement which I believe exists.

But now what is the disagreement? And there is a very clear-cut disagreement regarding political theory today in this country. That can be indicated by the following formula. Some people understand by theory what they call causal theory, and other people understand by theory what they call normative theory. I am sure you have heard these expressions. It is based on a distinction about which I will have to say quite a lot in this course, a basic distinction: the distinction between facts and values. It is the generally though not the universally accepted view in the profession that only factual statements can be validated and invalidated, or can be true or false, whereas value judgments as value judgments are beyond the control of reason. Now this distinction between factual judgments and value judgments, or the distinction between facts and values, is underlying the two different notions of theory. Causal theory wants to help us understand facts and the relations of facts; a normative theory claims to be a rational doctrine regarding what [are] now called values. Now this disagreement regarding normative and causal theory is now the central theme of a discussion in the profession, and if I see right, the discussion at this level is exhausted. I don't think you will find a single new argument on either side since about five or six years [ago], and what is required is to put the whole question on a much broader basis.[13] I will explain this later.

Yet we must not forget another element in present-day political theory, and that is neither normative nor causal theory, but the substitution of the history of political theory or political philosophy for political philosophy itself. That is, I don't think there are people who demanded it in this form, at least not in the last generation, but it is an administrative or bureaucratic fact. If you look at many announcements of courses in colleges and universities under the title political theory, you find just courses on the history of political theory.

Now let us think about the subject for a moment. The substitution of the history of political philosophy for political philosophy is based on the assumption that political philosophy proper is impossible, and the ordinarily-given reason would be this: every political philosophy constitutes a form of the illegitimate transition from factual judgments to value judgment, and hence political philosophy is an absurdity and therefore the only thing we can do is study the history of political philosophy. Now I would say the history of political philosophy studied on this basis is absurd. We do not learn anything from it which you would not learn from a paragraph in a textbook on logic in which it is demonstrated that the transition from factual to value judgments is impossible. The proper place for a history of political philosophy under this dispensation would be some footnotes to a textbook on logic, where you illustrate the absurdity of this

transition from facts to values by examples from Plato, Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseau, for example. But if someone believes that for one reason or another one should study political philosophy out of some kind of sentimental love for things past, perhaps, then I would say that on this basis the history of political philosophy cannot be studied at all. No sane man would go into this tough work without an incentive. Now the incentive for studying [a] doctrine is the possibility that this is a true doctrine, and that one might learn something from it. But if you know in advance that you cannot learn anything serious from it, it is a waste of time and no one will study it. The interpretation of the political philosophies of the past supplied on this basis show the lack of incentive very clearly. They don't take the necessary care. Why should they? It is no more intellectually respectable, perhaps less respectable, than stamp collecting.

The minor correction I have to make I will make very soon. One could say, only to indicate the other possibility, the belief in the impossibility of political philosophy in itself is perhaps the core, intellectually, of what we call the crisis of our time. By doubting of the possibility of political philosophy, one doubts, one could say, the whole principle of the Western tradition. One becomes by this very act free from mere tradition. We do not continue a tradition because we no longer believe in it. This in itself might liberate the human mind, might induce people to take a fresh look at Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, etc. But very far from it, they don't take a fresh look. Fantastic as it may sound, they continue a tradition of understanding, say, Rousseau, while they themselves deny the basis of that understanding by denying the possibility of political philosophy.

But now let us look at the other side of the picture and talk about the serious thing. The unseriousness in this matter is not my fault. I only have to reproduce it, otherwise we cannot reach an understanding. Why is this history of political philosophy a necessity now, and precisely now, from every point of view? The people who believe that only a causal theory is possible are concerned with discovering laws of political behavior. Behavior is now the term used in contradistinction to the other thing, values: how people behave, with no judgment on the value of this behavior; how they behave, just as a stone behaves, a star behaves, a louse behaves, and so on. We want to find out laws of political behavior, not laws describing how American voters behave in the Truman–Eisenhower period. That would be on a low level of generality. A really scientific mind would never be satisfied with that. In other words, a true scientific approach is fully alive to the danger of parochialism, that they might make statements about political life which are valid for a little corner of the earth for a short while. For example, someone might write an article on conservatism, and the only basis he has are some observations he made in the northern United States, say around 1956. I think every scientific mind is absolutely shocked by such a thing. Why not look at Elizabethan England, for example, and see if what is true of conservatism there is true of conservatism here, and so on? Otherwise this can't be called a scientific statement of a decent degree of universality. So this danger of parochialism we know very well. And then to overcome that danger, we have to know the past. We cannot say anything about political behavior of the future in an empirical manner, for the obvious reason that there cannot be empirical knowledge of future events as such. But we can have knowledge of the past [and we need such knowledge] in order to enlarge our

horizon, and that is [what is] ordinarily understood by "historical knowledge." We must understand the past as it really has been in order to get data for sufficiently large generalizations. And of course we must not take these phenomena which we investigate—say, voting techniques in Athens in the fifth century—we must not take them out of their context. We must see the difference between this kind of democracy and our kind of democracy, otherwise we get misunderstood data.

Now among these things that we must study as strictly empirical behavioralist scientists there are not only institutions and things but also ideologies, [because it is generally said that they play a considerable role in political life]. I believe I can say this is universally admitted.[14] So we have to study the ideologies, and not only present-day ideologies, because any generalizations we make about, say, communist and Fascist ideologies [are] of course not sufficient for establishing general laws, because maybe the ideology of the divine right of kings had an entirely different structure as an ideology. One cannot decide this without study. I go beyond that. Among these ideologies we find also certain assertions which are traditionally called political theories or political philosophies. What kind of ideologies are they? Are they the same as ideologies in general? We have to investigate. Moreover, for a proper understanding of this particular kind of ideologies, which are called political philosophies, we have to investigate how these doctrines were understood by their originators, say, Locke, and how they were understood by the mass of the followers, or for that matter by the opponents or adversaries. Is what Locke meant the same as what his followers meant? Or did the followers perhaps not fully understand? Or do we think we can construe what Locke meant by mating the view of his followers with the view of his opponents, and say somewhere in between it must be? We don't know, so we must study Locke's doctrine itself. And then we may make this interesting observation: that on the way from a superior mind to his followers, however intelligent, the doctrines change somehow their character. In this kind of inquiry there is a phenomenon called routinization of charisma. Did you ever hear of that? It was introduced by Max Weber.[v] Well, there is something like charisma, or whatever. [It was] a Christian theological concept originally, but used sociologically by Max Weber as a special gift or genius, in the sense that President Eisenhower had a personal charm, or in another way, that de Gaulle is a tragic figure, and so on. Weber found out a general law which he called the routinization of charisma: an original inspiration becomes bureaucratized. This is regarded as a legitimate theme in Weber's science. By the same token, I would say that the vulgarization of high thought must also be a legitimate theme.

So if we really want to put our behavioral social science on a broad basis, we must study the political philosophies of the past on their own terms as carefully as possible, otherwise we will miss a very important part of social reality. When we do this, however, we make a strange experience (some of us, at least, may do) if we [15]study [carefully] such a doctrine entirely from an historical or sociological point of view. In order really to understand it, we must enter into that doctrine, we must take it seriously. We must in a

[v] Max Weber (1864-1920), German sociologist and author of many works, including *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). For his discussion of the routinization of charisma, see *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), chapter 16.

way re-enact the thought, say, of Locke. That means, in other words, that we must look at political things from the point of view of Locke. It is not enough merely to read and quote, you must experiment with it. Now in the moment you do it, you may find to your surprise that it works. What is the consequence? The consequence is that you look at our present-day scientific, behavioralistic social science from without. You do not look any longer at the social phenomena from the present-day scientific behavioralist's point of view, you look at them from the philosophic point of view. And perhaps you[16] [have] the experience that it is feasible, and even has its advantages and is not merely an "adventure,"[vi] like going to a country fair and having all kinds of pseudo-dangers there, but it is really a serious thing, to learn. In a word, you learn eventually that the true understanding of the basis of present-day social science is not logic but what is popularly known as the history of social or political philosophy. Logic, as it were, is merely a kind of[17] [petrified] statement of the premises, say, of present-day social science. But what these premises mean, the matrix by which they have a human appeal, that will come out from such a study of the history. Therefore, even if we grant the premises of behavioralist social science today, we are forced by the demands of that very science to make certain experiments, the outcome of which cannot be predicted in all cases. It is a venture, and you embark, as it were, on a sea where the winds may drive you where no computer machine can predict.

Now let me link this up with an issue I mentioned before. I said that if we look at the situation of political science, social science, political theory, quite from the outside—and[18] [this] impression will be confirmed all the time—we see that the issue is the fact–value distinction, and a certain discussion of this issue has been going on for some time. But this issue is not well understood if it is not put on a broader basis. The fact–value distinction presents itself as the necessary consequence of scientific method, scientific logic, or what have you. The fact–value distinction belongs to what presents itself today as the scientific understanding of political things. But there is also another understanding of political things with which we all are familiar, and that I will loosely call the commonsense understanding of political things. The citizen's understanding of political things is unaware of the fundamental distinction between facts and values. When the citizen says, "This fellow is a crook," and then says, "This fellow is six feet high and has this kind of hair," he doesn't have the impression that[19] [these] statement[s] logically [differ]. In the case of the crook, he might have to go before a law court to establish that this fellow is a crook beyond a shadow of a doubt, but that is secondary. The statement in itself has the same "logical" character. So the fact–value issue is linked up with a broader issue: scientific understanding in contradistinction[20] [to] the citizen's understanding of political things.

Now in the cruder versions of the scientific behavioralist's view, we are of course told that the commonsense understanding is bunk, no good. And there are wonderful proofs, like common sense admits that there are witches. For common sense, witches are as real as nonwitches, and we need science to get rid of witches. Common sense is a mixture of some truth with extraordinary superstitions and so on. You can't trust the whole thing: forget about it, make a clean sweep, make a clean break with common sense. This is of

[vi] Quotation marks in original.

course absolutely impossible, and not owing to a weakness of the flesh that can be overcome by more refined methods, but it is in the nature of the case impossible. Any statement made by any one hundred percent mathematical political scientist is based on every point on commonsense knowledge. Even if he checks on every point and, for example, wouldn't believe that Hitler's Nazi Germany went down in 1945, and would go to archives to make absolutely sure there was a capitulation of Germany at that time—he could do that, but ultimately he depends on the same kind of understanding every G.I.[vii] had who knew at a certain moment that the war was over. A commonsense understanding of political things is the indispensable basis of any possible scientific doctrine. This elementary thing must be mentioned. I am ashamed of it, but it must be mentioned because some people act as if this were not true.

Commonsense understanding of political things is the matrix out of which scientific understanding emerges, and if I were a behavioralist I would argue as follows—I would demand this from myself: Granted that scientific understanding has advantages which can never be possessed by commonsense understanding, this scientific understanding is surely posterior to commonsense understanding and is a modification of it. Being a scientific man, I want to know the nature of this modification, the nature of this transformation, and would want to see how out of commonsense understanding (say, of the American party system) a scientific understanding emerges and what it gives me that I did not get from the commonsense understanding. This is not based on a vague belief in science in general, which we believe is based on the successes of the natural sciences, on successes which have no parallel, no parallel whatever within political science, but it would really require a study.

Now let us think about that for one moment. We want to understand first what the commonsense understanding of political things means. That is, we want to understand how[21] the political things present themselves to the citizen or to the statesman or to everything in between, and not only now in this country but essentially, at all times, whenever men live together in political society—which is in most places, most of the time. We demand then as our first task, to repeat, a coherent and lucid exposition of the political things as they show themselves in political life. A very difficult job. We have a comfort: this has been done before us. We don't have to do it. I contend that this is exactly what we find in Aristotle's *Politics* more than in any other book in existence: a presentation of the political things as they appear to us as citizens. And it will be the general thesis of this course not simply to prove that but to consider this contention, because I will have to make many footnotes, many qualifications to this statement; but this is as it were a kind of slogan, a half to-be-fulfilled promise of this course. Now I will first show you why it cannot be literally true. We ordinarily call this citizen's understanding the commonsense understanding in contradistinction to the scientific understanding. Now this distinction between common sense as I used it now and science is a consequence of the development of modern science in the seventeenth century. After this new science had emerged and some limitations of this new science appeared, people who were aware of that limitation coined terms like our present-day term "common sense" to indicate that [on] which a science cannot deliberate. "Common sense" as used

[vii] A G.I. is a soldier of the U.S. Army, the letters standing for "government issue."

now by me and by many contemporaries is postscientific, meaning postmodern[viii] science, and therefore cannot be applied to Aristotle, who was in this sense of course prescientific, namely, premodern. There are other objections which are obvious and which I would only like to mention lest anyone believes I do not see some of these things.

Let me restate my thesis. I overstate it deliberately. There was always such a thing as political thought or political understanding, that goes without saying. You find that everywhere where people live together and have something like a government. At a certain moment political philosophy or political science, in contradistinction to that simply prescientific understanding, emerged, and I would say that the great document of this emergence of political philosophy or political science is Aristotle's *Politics*. Now one can make many objections. In the first place, on a purely antiquarian basis, why Aristotle? There were some thinkers prior to Aristotle—Plato, the sophists, perhaps some others—who also were political philosophers and political scientists. We have to go into that. The second point which someone could make is this. You call this common sense the element of Aristotle's *Politics*, but that is unreasonable because it is not simply common sense but Greek common sense. And someone would even specify and say it is not simply Greek in general but Greek upper-class common sense, and not, as I claim, the common sense of man as man. In a word, I have to face these serious difficulties, and in doing that, in trying to deal with them, I hope I can give you some understanding of the usually overlooked basic principles of Aristotle's *Politics* and therewith of our whole problem. This much about the general intention of the course.

Is there anyone who would like to argue with me or to question or object to me regarding any point I made? That might be helpful for all of us. Let us not be shy. Did I make sufficiently clear in the manner of my introduction what this course was about? I mean in what sense it was a historical theme, but yet not approached from the historian's point of view? Did you see the link-up between what is going on in social science and especially political science today? I assume that each one of you has roughly the kind of knowledge which a college graduate of the[22] College[23] [has].[ix] But surely some of you come from other colleges and may not have had this particular advantage.

Student: You said that a historical understanding of the period in which Aristotle lived wouldn't help us at all.

LS: Did I say anything at all about the period in which Aristotle lived?

Same student: I don't think so. I'm not sure.

LS: All right, I will tell you. I did not. I did this not merely out of neglect, but I will try to indicate the difficulty. When someone speaks of the period in which Aristotle lived, then he assumes that we know such a period somehow. This knowledge is not based on Aristotle in particular but on other ancient writers, on findings underground—you know, on diggings and all kinds of these things. A kind of composite picture of Athens around

[viii] That is, subsequent to modern science.
[ix] That is, the College of the University of Chicago.

350 [BCE] emerges. Yes, but assume we know that. Perhaps Aristotle has seen the very same thing entirely differently. Is this not possible? What is the use of this knowledge of the so-called objective situation? For the understanding of Aristotle it is probably very small. Or the other way 'round, the picture which you now get would surely be entirely different fifty years from now. New diggings, you know, and also new points of view in historical investigation by modern scholars: an entirely new picture. To the extent that Aristotle doesn't say a word about Alexander the Great, that's quite true. Perhaps in studying the *Politics* you see why he didn't say a word about Alexander the Great. You know what I mean by this historical allusion? Alexander was a younger contemporary of Aristotle's who conquered the Persian Empire and in a way rendered the so-called Greek city-state a museum piece; and the key theme of Aristotle's *Politics* is said to be the Greek city-state. Why we will study the *Politics* more than Plato's *Republic* is secondary, and I will take that up on the proper occasion. Is this a sufficient answer for the time being?

Same student: I have another question. Were you saying there were two bodies of commonsense understanding, postscientific and the one which existed before?

LS: You can say that is a common view today. The common view today—and it has some basis, it is not entirely unfounded—is that there is a kind of average opinion in every society, in every country. That differs of course from country to country, from age to age. But I mean something more precise than that. It is not easy to define, but to begin with all the . . . are in favor of the view that there is not *the* common sense: there are *n* common senses. That is the accepted view, and it is very respectable. The question whether there can be *the* common sense, this unchangeable basis of politics, is in need of argument. It cannot be asserted without further ado. But on the other hand, on the basis of what we have today (I mean our methodological problems in political science) it becomes indispensable to make the distinction between science and common sense, to admit the priority of common sense, and to demand the clarification of commonsense understanding as a basis for the clarification of the derivative scientific understanding. Whether this can be done, because of the historical horizon which is here, is a question. I believe it can be done, but it is surely a question.

Student: At the beginning you mentioned that there are two roots of Western culture, the Greek and the biblical, and I thought you said these two were not only different but incompatible. I wondered in what sense—

LS: That is a very good question and I am grateful to you that you raised it. That they are in a sense compatible is obvious. When I said that they are incompatible I mean they are incompatible ultimately and in the following way. The West has tried for two thousand years now to create a synthesis of [the] Bible and Greek [philosophy], and to some extent this synthesis has worked. But in what sense? Each of these two partners claims to have the right of way, namely, say, the theologians: they have no hesitation to use Greek philosophy, they never have had, but they understood Greek philosophy as the handmaid of theology. That can be done. Also the other way round: there were quite a few philosophers, followers of Aristotle, who said religion is very good and useful. But what

that means is determined by philosophy, not by what biblical religion itself says. In other words, they also admitted biblical religion as a handmaid. [24]The only objection to what I said would be this: that there can be a synthesis in which neither element is authoritative or commanding, and I believe that doesn't exist. In other words, the synthesis will always either be in the element of faith, and then the biblical element is victorious, or it will be in the element of knowledge, and philosophy will be victorious.

Student: Are you implying or giving the impression that the historicist's approach to political science is a rather useless thing, say like stamp collecting? Is it a case like that of the atheists' justification for studying mythologies as phenomena of human history?

LS: The case of the atheists studying mythology might be a bit more reasonable, except that anyone who has nothing else whatever to do might do all kinds of things. But regarding the term "historicism," I use this term with a certain precision, and I would not call this position which I sketched historicism. In a loose sense of course it means to lose one's self in historical studies and regard them as an end in themselves. That is something which has no theoretical respectability, but being a liberal man I feel that everyone should be permitted to do what he likes to do provided it is not downright criminal. But it has no theoretical respectability because, above and beyond the fact that they cannot give an account of what they are doing, they cannot do what they set out to do well because they lack the incentive. To that extent I think it is really true—now, how do they call it? "Motivation," I believe. They are not really motivated properly. If you know in advance that it is bunk, for example, why[25] [shouldn't] someone study astrology or various forms of magic? Surely[26] we do not expect the most important information about ourselves from the study of magic. You would admit that. And[27] [the] history of political philosophy claims to be more than a study of notorious errors, but if you read the introduction to Sabine's *History of Political Thought*,[x] which I haven't read for some time, but my overall impression from the introduction or preface was it is fundamentally a history of absurdities. But Sabine is a very gentle man and therefore he would never put it in these harsh words, but people who are not so gentle must be permitted to spell it out.

Student: On your assumption that the theories of the past must be studied on their own terms, how much does this emphasis on their own terms involve linguistic qualifications and exactness of language and all that? For example, the use of Hobbes of a term like "force," which is perhaps more mechanistic than a contemporary political theorist would use it.

LS: Read Hobbes and see what he means when he uses "force." Ideally, if you had the time for that, you would collect all the passages where Hobbes uses "force." Some general speculations on the basis of a single passage where Hobbes uses the term "force" where no one would use it today are not sufficient. We have to have a notion of the range of the meaning of the word in Hobbes, and then probably you will find quite a few meanings . . .[xi] absent from Hobbes. I don't see what is impossible here, I mean unless

---

[x] George H. Sabine (1880-1961), American philosophy professor. The book Strauss refers to is Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: American Publishers, 1937).

[xi] Here the original transcriber notes: "(. . . is symbol for inaudible)."

one's own disinclination for doing dull statistical work is regarded as an impossibility. This objection which you make is frequently made, but as stated by you, I don't think it has any force. In alien languages like Greek, it is possible they, Plato and Aristotle, use terms[28] that have no immediate equivalent in modern languages. But if these terms are important, key terms of political doctrine, they explain them; and if Plato doesn't do it, surely Aristotle does it. There is a key term, if I may anticipate later developments, a term ordinarily translated by "constitution" in Aristotle and also in Plato. What they mean by "constitution" is something entirely different from what an average American means when he speaks of constitution. It is very easy to see the difference and even to describe it neatly, for he says what he means by that *x* that the translators render by "constitution." There is a kind of skepticism which is supported, and I do not mean you by that, that comes from an aversion to a certain kind of indispensable work. One conclusion would be not to give up but to do the necessary kind of work to answer that question. Surely if you try to understand, say, Aristotle on the basis of translations only, you suffer from a considerable handicap. And I can also explain it to you. All the modern translators—not the medieval translators, who were men of an entirely different stamp—but the modern translators have generally this view: fundamentally we know better, i.e., we can use the terms most convenient, most fluent in our times and use them for translating these terms which meant something very different. [xii] —lived in these wonderfully happy, halcyon times before . . . There was no incentive. They knew that the familiar topics of nineteenth-century political philosophy—the theory of political obligation, the state and the individual—that these are the key themes. They knew that because they knew that they lived on the peak of the world. Now we have become doubtful of that belief that we are fundamentally wiser, more experienced, more advanced than the men of the past. Therefore, in proportion as we become uncertain in our superiority, we become more respectful of the men of the past and also, by the way, of the men of other cultures, and therefore we take them very seriously. Do you get the idea of what I am driving at? I always have to use illustrations which may not be familiar to you, and since I don't know you, I can't guess which would be the most appropriate.

Same student: Perhaps I can put it another way in terms of, say, Locke in the *Second Treatise* having used . . . [xiii] of the past, where some treated it as being really two contracts while others treated it only as one, because people interpret in the second case the use of the word "trust" to imply a contract. Again, there is a distinction between the words "trust" and "contract."

LS: Well, doesn't this again indicate what one has to do? Does "trust" necessarily imply a contract in any technical sense in Locke's usage? And is there any evidence whatever for a contractual relationship between the legislature and the executive, which would seem to be the practical substantive point? Is there any in Locke? I mean, that people speak of a contract which James II broke in 1688 does not mean that Locke agreed with that view, even if he should occasionally in this radically popular statement [silently] refute this kind of understanding. These are all specific questions which are in principle

[xii] The tape was changed at this point.

[xiii] A multiple-sentence lacuna seems likely here. Strauss's response suggests that the student refers to Locke's *Second Treatise* (1689), chapter 19, section 222.

solveable. They require sometimes very much work. But it is not the kind of problem which some people believe you are confronted with in poetry. I mean, Locke did not try to convey a mood. And that is more brutal, and not so delicate. I see in principle no difficulty. The practical difficulties are always very great, but that is what we are here for. Yes?

Student: Today you used the terms "political theory" and "political philosophy," it seemed to me, to be pretty much the same value, and as being one . . . Do you feel there is no distinction?

LS: Oh, by all means. But in an introductory lecture (and I have been away from this campus for fifteen or sixteen months, and there are so many new faces), I tried to be as colloquial as possible. I think one should make a distinction, and I may speak of it occasionally. But you know that in such a general statement where I try to describe an overall situation in the profession, I cannot use the terminology which I regard as the most exact. That would be a kind of distortion.

Student: This is somewhat related to it. You spoke about the difference between ideologies and theories, and you spoke of ideology as being not theoretically defensible or demonstrable, and I wonder if you would go further and say that any ideology is dishonest or a kind of deceit or in a degree untrue.

LS: If you are liberal enough to include under deceit also self-deception, I would go along with that. The people who are downright liars are very rare; mostly I think they are deceived deceivers. I would say that if I had any right, I would simply abolish the term "ideology." Also in empirical studies it is so wrong, so misleading. When speaking of very simple principles of justice, say, a trial, given principles that are not more refined than "first come, first served," to call this an ideology seems so preposterous and disgusting. The term is wholly unnecessary. One can say "opinion," political opinion, is a much better term and is much less pretentious. In other cases, one must speak of "false if impressive doctrines," which would simply be clearer than "ideologies." But these exact social scientists are terribly inexact in their terms. To treat Plato's *Republic* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the Four Freedoms statement[xiv] all on the same level, and such a simple principle as "first come, first served," seems to me to reveal a shocking lack of discrimination.

Let us go on now. Now when I refer to the classics, and especially to Aristotle's *Politics*, one could rightly say: Granted that present-day social science is really not self-sufficient and is in need of a genuine political philosophy, why not a modern political philosophy: Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, and so many others? That is an absolutely necessary question. I will not speak about my justification now because that will be throughout the course, but[29] [I will give you] one indication. I believe that the distinction between classic and modern political philosophy is the most fundamental historical distinction which we can

[xiv] A reference to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address. The Four Freedoms are freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

make. If we look at the galaxy of great thinkers from the earliest to the latest and we call this sequence the history of philosophy, one is practically compelled, as we all know, to divide that into periods. And I would say that the most sensible and the clearest division is that into modern and premodern political philosophy. Now let me explain that. That something has happened is generally admitted. That is of course in itself not decisive. The tradition which was dominant until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was represented by Aristotle chiefly, but also by Plato, and these two men go back quite obviously to a man who never wrote: Socrates. And the traditional view was [that] the founder of political philosophy is Socrates, a view which has been contested, but I will discuss that later. One can say generally speaking that political philosophy up to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was one or the other modification of Socratic thought. Then the break occurred. How do we know that break occurred? I take here again the most simple criterion. When did people say,[30] "All [of] what[31] [came] before me was wrong or at least fundamentally inadequate, we have to make a radically new beginning"? I would assume until further notice that where a break is announced, a break will occur.

Now if you go through the elements—and that is not so very difficult, because after all there are not so many thinkers of the first rank, and you can read especially the prefaces and the introductions to their work where the statements ordinarily occur[32]—then you will find the strongest statements of this nature occur within the political philosophy of Hobbes. And surely something very profoundly changed with Hobbes. If you apply this external criterion . . . [xv]—the claim to make a radically new effort in political philosophy, that disposes of many assertions which are made today. For example, some people say the Stoics present a radical change. That is a more modern construction. We know very little of the Stoics, I mean the original Stoics—we have only fragments. We know Cicero, and Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. This is all late. But whatever is there does not imply any break with the fundamental principles of Socrates. There is a considerable difference between them and Plato and Aristotle, but not a fundamental break: a modification. And then some people say that a writer of the fourteenth century, called Marsilius of Padua,[xvi] is in a way the first modern political thinker. But if you read Marsilius, you see he doesn't claim to be more than an Aristotelian. Aristotle is the authority. And prior to investigation I would give Marsilius the benefit of the doubt and would say that if he had such a radical idea, he would have seen that this was not Aristotle, unless he was a man lacking judgment and then he would be ruled out as a founder of political philosophy as a man lacking intelligence. Now what other examples are the most common? Well, Machiavelli. That is slightly more complicated; I will not go into that now. At any rate, I would say[33] [that] this age,[34] the seventeenth century, the age in which modern science

---

[xv] There was a break in the tape at this point, and a multiple-sentence lacuna seems likely here. The Strauss archive includes a typescript of a set of lecture notes prepared by an anonymous student who attended this course. The notes are in outline form, forty-nine pages long, and accurate. In some cases they help to fill gaps in the transcript. In this case, they include this statement: "No previous break was so great [as Hobbes's]."

[xvi] Marsilius of Padua (c.1275-1342), Italian physician and political philosopher, author of the *Defensor pacis* (1324). For an English translation, see *Defensor pacis*, translated by Alan Gewirth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

came into its own, had at the end [of it] a controversy called "the quarrel among the ancients and the moderns," in France especially, but of course also in England. There is one document with which most of you will be familiar immediately, namely, Swift's *Battle of the Books*. Ordinarily it is understood as a literary question, whether modern tragedies and comedies, say, of Corneille and Racine,[xvii] are better or worse than Euripides's or Sophocles's tragedies. But the really interesting thing is not in the field of literature but in the field of philosophy and science, and in particular also in our special part, political philosophy. A genuine fundamental break has occurred and very much depends on the understanding of the meaning of this fundamental change.

Now in order to prepare such an understanding, I think we should start from a simple consideration which I have proposed to my classes in the past, and if there is somebody here who has heard me say so, I ask for his indulgence. Let us start from the end, at least from what is for us the investigative end. [Let us start] from today and contrast the overall notion of philosophy as it has emerged with the Aristotelian notion. This, I think, is sufficiently broad as an introduction to our theme. [It] also requir[es] footnotes, but certain things can be observed which are immediately evident. Now Aristotle divided philosophy in the following way. There is a kind of prelude to it which doesn't form a part of it. That he calls logic. Then philosophy itself is divided into two main parts, theoretical and practical.[35] Each is subdivided into three parts: theoretical into mathematics, physics ("physics" means here the whole [of] natural science), and theology or metaphysics. (Aristotle speaks of "theology." The term "metaphysics" is not in Aristotle, that is a traditional term.)[36] [The] practical is divided into three sciences: ethics, economics, and politics. That was the Aristotelian division. Now what about the present-day division of philosophy? By that I do not mean all that you find in the present day but what is characteristic of the present day. For example, the division of sciences used by present-day Thomists, neo-Thomists, would be characteristic of the present day. Just help me enumerate the branches of philosophy as they occur in an announcement of courses.

Student: Aesthetics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of history, political philosophy or philosophy of the state, philosophy of religion.

LS: I know there are people who also speak of metaphysics as a branch of philosophy, but this is already controversial, [and] is not generally admitted. Now look at the list, what do we find? What are the massive differences? What does the list omit that Aristotle does not?

Student: Physics, mathematics, economics.

Different student: Not mathematics, at least Russell[xviii] would include it as a form of—

[xvii] Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) and Jean Racine (1639-1699), French tragedians.
[xviii] Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), British philosopher and mathematician; author of *The Principles of Mathematics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903) and *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), and other works.

LS: Well, I am not in the habit of making concessions to the noble lord,[xix] but today I am in the mood to make a concession. Surely physics and economics are not regarded as parts of philosophy, but what does this mean? What does this little thing mean? To what do they belong, may I ask? What is the overall field to which physics and the other natural sciences belong? What is this called? I believe they call it "science." Now in other words, Aristotle does not make a distinction between philosophy and science to which we are accustomed. That is of tremendous importance. This distinction as we use it is a modern distinction which is not so very old. What happened in the seventeenth century was not the revolt of science against metaphysics, it was the revolt of the new philosophy or science against the Aristotelian philosophy or science. The establishment of nonphilosophic science is the most important event and everything else—what we are doing now—is a consequence of this, because this separation of philosophy and science . . . and all the other things which affect political life . . .

Now what else do we observe? I mean, I could develop that very easily. One could say that prior to modern time[s], physics, natural science in general, was never metaphysically neutral. I mean, you had to be either an Aristotelian in your physics, or a Platonist, or a Stoic, or an Epicurean, or what have you. But it is of the essence of the modern physicist or chemist that as such he does not belong to any metaphysical denomination. The sciences are meant to be metaphysically neutral, and their intellectual dignity is due to the fact that they are beyond the age-old idols of the philosophical schools. That is thought to be a proof of their higher cognitive dignity. This is science. Philosophy is not science. That means also it lacks the cognitive dignity of science, and it leads some people to wonder whether it has any cognitive dignity and some people to wonder whether it has any dignity at all. So that is surely an important part of the picture.

Now what else do you see? I mentioned a distinction between theoretical and practical. That has been abolished. Our distinction between theoretical and applied has nothing to do with the Aristotelian scheme. This I will take up another time. I would like to mention only one more point. For the understanding of the Aristotelian scheme it is necessary to know the order of the three theoretical sciences as an order of ascent. Mathematics is lower than physics, and physics is lower than theology or metaphysics. So the highest theme is, then—and I would like to make every concession to the variety of opinion as to what Aristotle meant—the highest theme is nature and/or God, the highest theme of philosophy. Now look at the modern scheme. Where do you find theology? In the completely transformed form of philosophy of religion. But what is the difference between theology and philosophy of religion? Theology is a doctrine of God, philosophy [of religion] is the study of human attitudes[37] toward God. Now if you would go through all these items, you would see immediately disciplines that deal with man: human thought, human conduct, human art, human society, human religion. And of course the philosophy of history is the philosophy of human history. So we can say the key theme in modern times has become man. That is not always clear and explicit. I would say it is not always explicit, but it is always clear. For a long time the key word of philosophy which described the theme of philosophy, especially on the continent, was the "consciousness." The consciousness of whom was always assumed: it was man. You could see [this] from

[xix] Bertrand Russell was the Third Earl Russell.

the book titles, *Treatise of Human Nature* [and] *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,[xx] in contrast with the book titles of classical and medieval times.

Now I give you a few illustrations so that you can see this affects us very much. The most striking illustration which I can find within political terms is this. In the tradition, especially in the Middle Ages, there existed the notion of a higher law, and that was called the "natural law," and this played a great role in modern times, in Locke and so on. And modern man invented, felt compelled to invent another term meaning in a way the same but not quite the same, and so we have it in one formula. What is that modern formula, meaning and yet not meaning natural law? Tom Paine's famous book, *Rights of Man*. You see, law is replaced by rights. That is in itself very important, because law meant primarily the prescription of duties rather than of rights. I will not pursue this other term (nature, not man)—although the natural law was also meant to be the law applied to man.

Another illustration. According to the older view, what is now called "art" was understood as imitation of nature. That meant art is lower than nature, and in a practical indication, that natural beauty—say, that of a beautiful youth, male or female—is higher than what the sculptor does. The sculptor cannot make a living human being. That his sculpture has certain advantages which the living human body doesn't have is clear—it is not in that same way destructible, it doesn't age—but it is also not a full human being. In the modern times, imitation of nature (understood or not understood, I don't investigate) ceased to be the formula for art. And how do people [now] call[38] art, I mean the peculiarity of art? Well, there are many words, but I will answer the question myself: creativity. Now they speak of "creative writing" in a very wide sense. When a girl who is in the second grade describes a trick to the group, that is[39] [called] creative writing. We don't have to speak about that. But creation, human creation, that is something much higher than acceptance of the given. And the older notion of culture, which I spoke of at the beginning, meant cultivation, cultivation of the mind; in other words, doing to the mind what the mind according to its nature demands in order to become cultivated, in order to become as perfect as possible. Altogether, then the attitude toward nature was one of cultivation; in modern times the key word has become "conquest of nature," which is the very opposite of the cultivation of nature.

It is impossible to understand the crisis of our time—a much-used word[xxi] and therefore a debased word, but nevertheless a meaningful word which it is hard to avoid—this crisis of our time cannot be understood if we do not understand the essential character of modern philosophy. We don't have to go into the question whether modern philosophy is only a kind of epiphenomenon of the true changes, economic or what have you, but one thing is certain, that if you want to know what this underlying change means, you have to listen first to the men who gave expression to this new spirit. These were, in the first place, the philosophers. Whatever one may think of philosophers, that is simply true: they are more precise, much more precise and much more articulate, and also much more honest, less fearful of traditional impediments and so on—not in the way of silly

[xx] Works by David Hume and John Locke, respectively.
[xxi] Presumably "the word" is "crisis."

beatniks, but of people who are truly courageous. And the true formulations for what has been going on, the classical formulations, you will find I daresay only on the peak of modern philosophy.

Now what I tried to do here was to give you a very schematic but in a way, I think, a very telling scheme of the fundamental changes going on. To begin with, only this way of looking at things is intelligible to us. As you can see from every example, when you are confronted with an assertion that art should be imitation of nature, that is infinitely less credible than if someone says that art is creativity. And the same applies to everything else. Now next time I would like to specify these points by making a parallel contrast between Aristotle's political science and present-day political science. Again, for the sake of clarity I will take what is now regarded in the profession by most people as political science and not what some people who are perhaps better or worse but surely not the majority of the profession think about political science. Then we will gradually approach the subject.

---

[1] Deleted "or."
[2] Deleted "presupposition."
[3] Deleted "or."
[4] Deleted "and."
[5] Deleted "of reminding."
[6] Deleted "of."
[7] Deleted "libertarianism."
[8] Deleted "do not."
[9] Deleted "have."
[10] Deleted "of."
[11] Deleted "politics."
[12] Deleted "this."
[13] Deleted "and."
[14] Deleted "Ideologies." Moved "because it is generally said…in political life."
[15] "Deleted "do that carefully, that"; moved "carefully."
[16] Deleted "make."
[17] Deleted "tri-petrified."
[18] Deleted "that."
[19] Deleted "this."
[20] Deleted "from."
[21] Deleted "do."
[22] Deleted "Chicago University."
[23] Deleted "gets."
[24] Deleted "and."
[25] Deleted "should not."
[26] Deleted "but."
[27] Deleted "if."
[28] Moved "Plato and Aristotle."
[29] Deleted "only."
[30] Deleted "that."
[31] Deleted "was."
[32] Deleted "and."
[33] Deleted "in."
[34] Deleted "in."
[35] Deleted "And."
[36] Deleted "And."
[37] Deleted "etc."

[38] Moved “now.”
[39] Deleted “also.”

Session 2: October 4, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: I have been asked what the principles of organization of this course are. I shall gradually lead up to classical political philosophy, especially Aristotle's *Politics,* and then present the problems according to their inner structure, and that will develop.[1] I believe I suggested[2] as recommended reading Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*,[ii] which is available as a paperback, as general background reading. I had heard much of the book when I put it down—and only favorable things, otherwise I wouldn't have recommended it. Now I have read about two-thirds of it and I am somewhat disappointed. But still, those of you who have never heard anything of things Greek except very superficial introductions would surely derive some benefit from it. Other books which are of any significance for us here I will mention while I go and recommend them to you. Is this sufficient for the time being? Aristotle's *Politics* I think you must read from cover to cover, if for no other reason because otherwise you will not be able to answer the questions at the end of the quarter.

Now let me give first a very brief summary of what I said last time. I started first from the broadest fact imaginable, spilling over the limits of academic life altogether: the famous crisis of our time, as far as it affects us in the West. I said that we have become uncertain of our purpose—that is the essence of the crisis—and this purpose was for some time the notion of a universal just society on the basis of universal affluence made possible by technology and science. The uncertainty as to this purpose implies a certain doubt of science, at least regarding the expectations for human life from science. Now the strictly academic equivalent of that doubt—that is the second point—is this: political philosophy has become doubtful, and[3] if one would make a straw vote in the profession, one could say it has been abandoned. Political philosophy as a pursuit establishing rationally the objectives of human life, and especially of social life, has been abandoned. Instead we have the so-called behavioralistic political science, a political science which limits itself to describing and analyzing actual human behavior without judging it in terms of goodness or badness. This behavioralistic study of political phenomena is, as it admits, in need of theory, but this theory has much more the character of methodology than of political theory proper. It is, as it calls itself, causal theory, and not normative theory. The basis of this distinction—of this whole pursuit—is the distinction between facts and values, between factual and value judgments. We have to speak about this later.

---

[i] See Strauss, "An Epilogue," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, 1995), 203-23. Originally published in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics,* ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 305-327.

[ii] Bruno Snell (1896-1986), German philologist. Strauss refers to *The Discovery of Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, translated by T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960). [Bruno Snell, Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Greichen (Hamburg: Claaszen & Goverts, 1946]

However important this issue of facts and values may be, it is part of a larger issue, and that larger issue is:[4] common sense as distinguished from science. To repeat the connection: for a commonsense understanding of political things, the distinction between factual and value judgments doesn't exist. If you say, "This is a poor senator," that has for common sense the same logical character as the statement "the senator is six feet high," although the ways of establishing the two things differ. In the one case you have to use a measuring rod and in the other case you have to look at the record, but that is not a radical difference. Now if we look at this distinction between common sense and science, especially common sense and the study of political things and political science, we observe the primacy of common sense. Before we can speak scientifically about any political phenomenon, we always have some primary knowledge which is of a nonscientific color. A simple example: that there are in this country, now and for some time, the Republican and Democratic parties, that is not scientific knowledge. Everyone knows that, and when you enter the halls of academe this kind of knowledge is not affected. Certain details are brought to light which the ordinary citizen or the well-informed citizen does not know, but this knowledge is the basis of any scientific investigation. Commonsense understanding of politics is primary, the scientific study is derivative. This observation implies a certain kind of a doubt of science, at least in this form. Science becomes a problem. The realization that science is derivative knowledge forces us to understand the character of this derivativeness. In this sense, even if science—political science, I mean—should survive the process of such an examination, it must undergo that process. To that extent science has become a problem.

Now the third point concerns a direct connection between the overall crisis and the academic phenomenon, the fact–value distinction. One can state this simply as follows: science in any form, natural as well as social, is a means for increasing man's power. This is not an afterthought. That was the demand made at the very beginning of the seventeenth century: *Scientia propter potentiam*,[iii] science for the sake of power, for the increase of man's power, both over non-men and over man himself. For example, you know there is a thing called manipulation of human beings—clearly, power over human beings made possible allegedly by psychology, sociology, and so on. Now science increases man's power, and there can be no doubt of it. But there is another question: the question [of] how *to use* that power. This question can no longer be answered by science, natural or social; that is the generally accepted view today. That is decided by evaluation, by value judgments, and they are no longer subject to rational criticism. In other words, science supplies us with means for almost any ends.[5] That *x* is the means for the end *y*—that can be known rationally, scientifically, but that *y* deserves to be an end, that can no longer be known. That[6] [depends] on everyone's own choice, preference, or whatever you might say. A distinction between good and bad ends is impossible. What is possible according to this view is to say that certain ends cannot be achieved; in other words, that it is a waste of time to try this and this thing. But still, if the man says: I would rather try vainly for end alpha than do anything else (his party, his funeral), from this point of view it is clear that even the value of science itself cannot be rationally established. Science

[iii] Thomas Hobbes, *Opera Philosophica Quae Latina Scripsit Omnia*, vol. 1, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London, 1839), 6. See also *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 1, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London, 1839), 7.

itself is chosen—and not only by scientists as a profession, that is another matter—but that we take science in any way seriously, that depends ultimately on our arbitrary will. Science is able to answer the question "What is science?" That is done by logic or methodology. But science cannot answer the question "Why science?" In this sense science is absolutely blind—and that is the accepted view, that is not a criticism. This is the clearest sign, it seems to me, of the fact that we have become uncertain of our purpose. That great power of man, reason, science, from which we expected in modern times something like terrestrial salvation, has lost its evidence. That is I think at the root of our intellectual uncertainty.

Now these difficulties induce us to inspect classical philosophy, classical political philosophy with the view as to whether classical political philosophy might help us. As a mere question, the problematic thesis which I suggested is that Aristotle's *Politics* presents to us the commonsense understanding of political things, that is to say the political things as they come to sight to the citizen or the statesman in contradistinction to the political scientist. To illustrate this again, the fact–value distinction just doesn't arise, whereas it necessarily arises on the basis of modern political science. Now I will gradually lead up to the details of this problem. For a primary clarification, I confronted last time the Aristotelian division of philosophy with the modern division, and two lessons appeared which are of special importance. The modern notion of philosophy is determined decisively by the fact that in modern times, philosophically neutral sciences have emerged. The natural sciences are the greatest example, but of course [also] economics, sociology, and what many people understand by political science. Philosophically neutral sciences have become established, and they are in fact authorities for philosophy. It is perfectly legitimate today to be doubtful of philosophy. You make yourself ridiculous if you are doubtful of science—I don't say in all quarters, but generally speaking. Science is in fact an authority for philosophy in a way that theology or the Bible was an authority for philosophy in the Middle Ages. That is the first point, the establishment of philosophically neutral sciences.

And the second point is that regarding the themes which are characteristic of philosophy:[7] in premodern thought the theme of philosophy was God and/or the cosmos. Modern philosophy as modern philosophy has as its central theme man, because all[8] [of the] philosophical sciences which are still [universally] admitted (we enumerated them last time) all deal with various aspects of man: aesthetics, ethics, philosophy of religion, and so on. Now there is a connection between these two points, the establishment of the philosophically neutral sciences, especially the natural sciences, and the shift of emphasis from God or the cosmos to man, for nature as the object of modern science is understood radically as a human construct, as a construct of the human mind. In the classic formulation by Kant, who meant by this formulation the Newtonian laws: the understanding, meaning by that the human understanding, prescribes nature its laws. What is given us [is] merely a chaos of sense data. They have to be ordered, interpreted, and that is a work entirely of the human understanding.[iv] In this sense, the human understanding prescribes nature its laws. At any rate, all concepts, whatever that may mean, are understood as constructs. This being the case, the object of science, especially

[iv] These arguments can be found in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), B xiii-xiv.

nature, is relative to the human understanding, relative to man. The paradoxical fact is that man is an infinitely more tiny and insignificant part in the modern view of the universe than he was in any older view. A very common view: there are human beings only on the earth, an infinitely small part of this universe, and men have existed there for a few million years, a billion years, it doesn't matter. Completely eccentric, in some out-of-the-way place in some corner there exists this proud beast who regards himself as the ultimate purpose, as the ultimate end of the whole thing, and objectively there is nothing to that. And yet very strangely, this whole universe as known, as something about which one can speak, *is* only by virtue of a certain human act, an organization by the human mind of the sense data. And furthermore, to make this clear, that man has an entirely different . . .

Everything is ultimately a human construct because whatever we know is a confirmed hypothesis, a confirmed theory, but these theories are all human constructs. Man is the constructor; man as the constructor is not a human construct. That comes out in one way or the other, in the extreme way as follows: there is at least one highest principle of all possible scientific theories, and this is called the principle of contradiction. That A is B and that A is non-B are absolutely incompatible. This is not a thing posited by theory, as any geometry, Euclidean or non-Euclidean, may be. It is inevitable for any human thought that claims to be thought: [it is] absolutely necessary, not constructed or imposed, irreducible. Now is there a connection (that is the question which I last raised) between the modern or present-day understanding of philosophy and the fact–value distinction as sketched before? That [connection] is ethics as a philosophic discipline according to the generally-held view, except "analysis," i.e., clarification of meanings, without reaching a decision as to that . . . This view of human conduct is the true view and the other views are wrong views. So even this philosophical ethics is no longer a normative discipline, but is as nearly descriptive and analytical as any of the empirical sciences.

Let us now continue and confront first present-day political science with Aristotelian political science, in other words, to come somewhat closer to our immediate subject. When I opposed the present-day view directly with the Aristotelian view, I assumed something which is of course in need of proof, and that is about something in between [the] present day and Aristotle, to say nothing of the Middle Ages, which you can say is philosophically based on Aristotle and therefore you can subsume it under Aristotle. But there is the galaxy of the great thinkers of modern times, who all rejected by implication the distinction between facts and values. I mean such men as Locke and Rousseau. They gave a normative teaching, of course, which they claim to be the rational teaching. What about modern political philosophy, where does it come in? Of course modern political philosophy is radically different from present-day social science, but it paved the way for it. Modern political philosophy, while still being political philosophy and not merely empirical analysis in the present-day sense, paved the way for present-day so-called empirical social science. I will give you two examples, the two simplest examples. The other ones would need too long a discussion.

When you read the present-day literature by these behavioralist people, there is one name of the great names of the past which always occurs, whom they regard in a way as their

church father, and that is Machiavelli. Machiavelli was not of course a present-day social scientist. His books were entirely normative, but there is an element of truth in it. One can state the peculiarity of Machiavelli in present-day lingo as follows: Machiavelli regarded the whole tradition of political philosophy prior to him, especially of course Aristotle, as "idealistic," and his doctrine was meant to be emphatically "realistic." The simplest and clearest document of that is chapter fifteen of *The Prince*. This is the first reading I recommend in addition to Aristotle's *Politics*, if you want to follow that course. Machiavelli develops his point that prior to him the political thinkers had been concerned with how man ought to live, with how man ought to be. He, on the other hand, will show how man *is*, how he lives, and on the basis of this realistic understanding show what the reasonable kind of policies are. In other words, the toughness of which the present-day social scientists are so proud is a heritage from Machiavelli. And there is, by the way, a simple empirical proof: the immediate church father of much of what is going on in social and political science today is Bentley (whose first name I have forgotten), *The Process of Government*.[v] I do not recommend this book to you, because it is very badly written and the effort you must make in order to understand it is not worth your while, unless you would like to specialize in [the] methodology of a certain kind of political science, then you have to read it. Now the notion of laws of behavior, in contradistinction to normative laws, seems to be foreshadowed in this chapter fifteen of Machiavelli's *Prince*.

I mention only one more specimen of modern philosophers who paved the way for present-day social science, and that is Hobbes. Hobbes is so important because he was the first philosopher whose central theme was power. You know there are many people who say the theme of political science altogether is power. That is a very complex and difficult thing. Machiavelli, for example, hardly uses the word power.[9] Some people say that Thucydides is the classic analyst of power, but you find the Greek word for power very rarely in Thucydides. However one might[10] describe what people like Thucydides on the one hand, and Machiavelli on the other have been doing—by the way, it is very different, what they are trying to do—the word "power" would not occur. But in Hobbes "power" is a central term, and not only in his political philosophy or moral philosophy, but in his natural philosophy, too. And what this means is very hard to say—I mean it would require a complicated analysis.

I mention one other point which I believe is of the utmost importance for present-day social science for which Hobbes stands. I am sorry, I said something absolutely foolish, grammatically foolish. I will restate it. There is one other point made by Hobbes which has become authoritative for present-day social science, and it has very much to do with the fact–value distinction as now used. Hobbes starts from a principle as the key to all morality and to all politics, which he calls self-preservation. The basic concern of each is self-preservation. This is of course abandoned now, because if that were not so, you would get a normative ethics. Whatever follows is justified by self-preservation [being] good, and Hobbes wanted to have such a normative concern, and that is out [of fashion]. But Hobbes took a further step. If I have a right to self-preservation, then I have a right to

[v] Arthur F. Bentley (1870-1957), American political scientist. Strauss refers to *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908).

the means of my self-preservation, obviously: otherwise the right would be useless. But different people have different opinions as to what are means to my self-preservation here, now, in these and these circumstances. Who is to be the judge? The traditional answer was: Well, a sensible man, of course. A fool might regard anything as conducive to his self-preservation and it would be ruinous to him. That leads of course to a certain difficulty, namely, perhaps the sensible man is not so much concerned with the fool's self-preservation, and the fool is very much concerned with his own self-preservation. To keep the matter as short as possible, Hobbes says every man is the judge. Every man is the judge; whether he is foolish or wise, decent or indecent, doesn't make any difference. His judgment as to his interest is without appeal. You cannot appeal to any higher consideration. That is an implication of present-day social science,[11] though it doesn't come out in this way, namely, that what a man regards as his interest, however stupid or foolish it may be, that is his interest. What a group regards as its interest, however foolish it may be, is its interest. You can no longer judge it. This was for Hobbes only a stage in a long reasoning, this principle [that] every man is his judge. But how Hobbes went on from here to arrive at his political philosophy is a long matter. But this [is the] principle: every man is his judge, and his judgment as to his general interest cannot be criticized. His judgment regarding colors surely can be criticized if he says that is green and it is in fact red, surely, or else you find out that he is color blind and therefore incompetent. But as far as his interest is concerned, he is . . .

Now I turn to my specific question, the characteristic difference between present-day political science and Aristotelian political science. I prepare it by two general remarks. I said that Aristotelian political science looks at political things in the perspective of the citizen, of the man concerned with his political society and with its goodness, the efficiency of its institutions, and so on. He does not look at the political scene from without, as you would look at a beehive, for example, or at a herd of cows or whatever it may be. He looks at it from within. He is not an outside bystander or spectator; he is in the middle of it. There arises this difficulty: there is of course a variety of citizen perspectives. To take the crudest but most famous example, the rich and the poor. Aristotle refers to this cleavage more than once, that the rich look differently at the political matters than the poor. There are other distinctions. There is also the middle class, which is neither the rich nor the poor. There are also the gentlemen proper. Now each of these groups (and you can subdivide it as much as you please) raises a claim. The rich want to have their way, the poor theirs, and so on. And this means in itself [that] the danger of civil war is in the situation. It doesn't become actual much of the time, but it is potentially there all the time. Now there are two ways. A foolish way, a bestial way, and that is just to shoot and kill, that is one way of solving it. But the human or humane way is the peaceful solution: to bring the issue before the forum of an impartial judge, who gives to each party in the conflict its due. You can say that was the naïveté of Aristotle, that he believed that such a thing is possible, [but] that is indeed his premise—and not only [the premise] of Aristotle but of political philosophy as long as it existed and exists, that there is a possibility of an impartial judgment. The impartial man as Aristotle sees him—or Plato—is not the neutral. The neutral man is an indifferent man. The impartial man is a man who is very much concerned with getting a just decision. A neutral is not a judge. Now this is the first point. The political philosopher in the classical sense is meant

to be the impartial umpire between the various classes of society. Whether all political philosophers, to say nothing of those who call themselves philosophers, fulfill that promise is another matter, but that they surely meant.

The second point, which we have to consider from the very beginning, is this. The term "political science," or rather its Greek equivalent, *politikē epistēmē*, is older than political science in any academic sense of the term. It originally meant the political skill, the skill of the statesman. I mean a skill which is not possessed by every citizen, the skill of the statesman, the skill of handling the affairs of the city by deed and by speech. Speech is so very important for the following reason: every decision of any importance must be preceded by deliberation, and deliberation means speaking. In other words, decisionmaking, which is now so common in a certain branch of political science, that is a word which hardly occurs. A key term throughout the ages is deliberation. It was understood that deliberation must lead to some kind of conclusion, but the emphasis was on deliberation, on the rational activity. When you speak of decision, you are inclined to think of the last step, this way or that way, tossing coins as it were, which may not be preceded by deliberation at all. I suggested long ago that someone interested in the present-day concepts of political science should make a study of the origins of the concept of decision, how it came in as a key term into political science. I suspect it came from Germany to this country in connection with the preparation of the Nazi movement and the breakdown of parliamentary deliberative practice, but that is a mere suspicion of mine. It should be truly investigated. I think if you would look up a book in political science written forty years ago, you would observe at the least that there is a much smaller frequency of the term "decision" than you find now.

Now to come back to my point, the ordinary citizen is a citizen for good or ill of this particular community, and the change from citizenship in one city to citizenship in another city is almost unknown. One might emigrate, but then he would be a metic.[vi] That he should change his citizenship is practically unknown. But the skill, the *epistēmē*, is transferable. There is the classic example of one of the greatest Athenian statesmen, Themistocles,[vii] who later on got into trouble and fled to the Persian king and advised him very well, to the damage of Athens.[12] The skill as such is transferable; it is not bound to the here and now as the loyalty proper [is]. Now given the fact that speech plays such a great role in any republican society—you know, especially in the republican society where the authoritative body is a deliberative body and viewed as a smaller group—you must be able to speak. A monarch can be more than laconic: there are famous cases of such men who were almost speechless but got significant things done. But nevertheless, in a republican society you have to be able to speak. Now it proved to be possible to teach speaking, and thus the art of rhetoric developed, and that was the first form of political science as a teachable thing. The skill of the statesman, that was not understood to be teachable, but political science as the art of speaking became teachable, and that was done by the so-called sophists prior to Socrates. The transferable character of that

[vi] In Athens, a metic was essentially a resident alien who could not hold property of his own, vote, or hold office.

[vii] Themistocles (c. 524-429 BCE), an Athenian statesman and general during the Persian War. His actions are told by Herodotus, Thucydides, and Plutarch.

thing is very easy to observe because the sophists were ordinarily strangers. They were migrating. It was not essentially related to any particular political community, it applied to all.

But this of course is a very narrow view of political science, that it should be the art of public speaking, the art of public speech. The whole substance of politics, one can say, is missed in this external and formal understanding of politics. The highest part of the political understanding as the ancients understood it is the legislative art, that art which you need [in order to be], not in the narrow sense in which we now mean it,[13] [a] member of the Senate or the House of Representatives, but the man who can devise a code for a community, a code meant to be valid indefinitely, for a very long time—something [of] what is now meant by the founding fathers, more than what we mean today by "the legislator." The framework in which political action of the moment always takes place, this is the highest art. Political philosophy as Plato and Aristotle meant it was the art of the legislator as a teachable art—not the art which some given legislator possesses by virtue of some natural gift, but[14] a teachable art. The political philosopher was understood to be the teacher of legislators. Now that lasted until a very long time ago; Bentham[viii] I think still understood himself as a teacher of legislators. So these two elements we must always keep in mind prior to any discussion of the details: that the political philosopher comes to sight originally on the one hand as the impartial umpire, not a partisan, and[15] [on the other hand] as the teacher of legislators.

Now I will go into a somewhat more detailed enumeration of the key differences between Aristotle's political science and present-day political science, and after that we can pause for a discussion. One point is only a repetition of what I said last time. Aristotle does not make a distinction between philosophy and science; hence he does not make a distinction between political philosophy and political science. And that is still true until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries[16]: *scientia civilis* and the *philosophia civilis* are the same thing; whereas today political science is one thing and political philosophy is another thing, and the basis of that is a general distinction between science on the one hand and philosophy on the other. I have discussed this point last time in the fact of the establishment of philosophically or metaphysically neutral sciences and I do not have to go into that now. I mention only the consequences so far as the social sciences are concerned. The Aristotelian politics, which you can call political science or political philosophy—it is the same thing—embraces what we call political science, economics, and sociology because the political association, being the highest association according to Aristotle, embraces all other associations. And therefore the study of all these other associations (trade unions, political clubs, and so on) is only a part of the analysis of the body politic. The same would be true of economics, or political psychology, or what have you.

The second point, and[17] [this] has also been alluded to last time: Aristotle makes a fundamental distinction between theoretical and practical sciences, a distinction which we have abandoned. We have in its stead a distinction between theoretical and applied

[viii] Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), English moral and political philosopher, author of *Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789).

sciences. Now applied sciences are sciences which presuppose the theoretical sciences. The practical sciences as Aristotle understands them do not presuppose theoretical sciences. The reason is this: human action has principles of its own, principles which are known independently of theoretical sciences. Most simply stated (too simply, as we shall see later, but sufficiently for the purpose) man has by nature certain ends. These ends have an inner order—hierarchy, as we say—and he is by nature inclined toward those ends. He doesn't have to go beyond these ends by nature known to him in order to find his bearings. Being aware of these ends, he must seek means for them and he can then, by growing up and acting reasonably,[18] gradually acquire a habit of choosing the proper means for the proper ends. This was called prudence.

Prudence means a habit of choosing the proper means for the right ends.[19] This prudence develops wholly independently of any scientific or academic institutions—I mean human society itself somehow takes care of that. Political science as Aristotle understands it, or practical science, including ethics, economics, and politics, consists in the coherent exposition of the ends of man in their proper order;[20] we can also say in expounding the general rules of prudence, what is now polemically referred to as proverbial wisdom. If I remember well, one example which was used was "a stitch in time saves nine." Unfortunately I forgot the proof that this is an unreasonable rule. That was done by Herbert Simon.[ix] If anyone has studied public administration, he would know that. The implication of Aristotle is that there is a sphere [21]of private prudence and [a sphere] of political or public prudence. Public or political prudence is of course more grand and more comprehensive. This is in principle self-sufficient and closed. That is indeed the Aristotelian view.

A difficulty arises as follows.[22] [Prudence], arising at all times in fundamentally the same way in men and not in all men equally,[23] is at all times endangered by false theoretical opinions. If you take a present-day example, there are at all times such things as Marxism, and if you look at the situation from the point of view of Aristotle, one would have to say that Marxism makes[24] prudent action [impossible]. This is due to the fact ultimately that it is theoretically false opinion. But there are at all times such false theoretical opinions. These false theoretical opinions can be refuted of course only by theoretical argument, so at all times practical wisdom or prudence—these are synonymous terms—at all times practical wisdom is in need of a theoretical defense. But this doesn't mean from Aristotle's point of view that practical wisdom is in need of a theoretical basis. That may seem to be a subtle distinction, but it is an important distinction.

Now if we look at present-day political science, one thing is absolutely elementary, as Dr. Watson[x] would say. There is not such a thing as natural knowledge of the natural ends of man. *N* men have *n* different values, and even different values at different times, and there is no possibility of distinguishing between a higher and a lower end. That is the

---

[ix] Herbert Simon (1916-2001), American political scientist and economist, author of *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations* (New York: The Free Press, 1947).

[x] Sherlock Holmes's Dr. Watson.

absolutely dogmatic premise now. In accordance with this, as I mentioned before, the distinction between theoretical and practical science is replaced by the distinction between theoretical and applied sciences. Some people have been speaking of policy sciences in political science, and they mean by that applied sciences. In the older view, in the Aristotelian view, the basis, the matrix of political science is[25] prudence, experience of life in a variety of circumstances. Of course that is not merely the experience of the spectator, but also that of the man who handles political things. That is the basis. There is solid knowledge of political things [which] is applied there that is in need of elaboration, of coherent exposition, and that is not done by the practical man. But it is good if it is done . . . in such places as universities. But in the modern view, if it is presented clearly as it is in some cases, the experience of life, practical wisdom, is not the basis of political science. The basis is scientific psychology. That is in many cases today some form of Freudian psychoanalysis (it doesn't make any difference which), but it is not the practical psychology of the politician, of the businessman, and especially of the more decent representatives of these professions. But scientific psychology is the basis. Perhaps to some extent it is also sociology, but sociology always points back in the order of the sciences to psychology, and I think we have to go back to this assertion I made before.

Now the third difference, and this is a mere enumeration: the awareness of the practical principles, of the principles of action, shows itself according to Aristotle primarily to a higher degree in public speech, authoritative speech, forensic speech, especially in law or in legislation, rather than in merely private speech. If you want to understand politics, listen to what legislators in the act of legislation[xi] say [about] how they justify the measure and so on, rather than to merely private speech. Although he was not such a fool as not to know that there are sometimes things, and perhaps in many important cases, unavowed things, never said in public, as behind the legislators—but the difference, the fact that they cannot avow it however powerful it may be, is terribly important. That throws a light on the political situation, [on] what can be avowed and what cannot be avowed, and that is of great practical importance. So Aristotle's political science views political things in the perspective of the citizen. I mentioned this before. There is a variety of citizen perspectives, and therefore the need for an umpire. The modern political scientist regards himself as an outside observer of the political scene even if he devises a method of participant observer, because this participant observer is a kind of make-believe. He is aware [that] he can't find out certain things if he doesn't play the participant, but the fundamental posture is that of the observer. He looks—to use a phrase stemming from one of the heroes of modern thought—he looks at political things as one would look at triangles or fish, the big ones swallowing the small ones.[xii] From this[26] an important difference follows regarding the language. The language of Aristotle in his political science is the language of the citizen. I wonder whether there is a single term in the *Politics* which does not stem from the political arena, which was not in common use, even the key terms, the central terms. For example, the central term in Aristotle's *Politics* is the Greek term *politeia*, which is ordinarily translated by the term "constitution." I will

[xi] The phrase "in the act of legislation" is ambiguous. It is possible that Strauss refers to the debates in the legislature that result in the written act, the written act itself, or both.
[xii] Strauss likely refers to Spinoza, *Ethics* (1677), part 3, preface, and *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), chapter 16, paragraph 2.

speak of that later. This is the key term, the term which was used in political life by political men long before it was taken up by political philosophers. But one thing is obvious to anyone who has ever seen anything of modern political science: that you cannot even begin to speak of political phenomena as viewed by the modern political scientists without having elaborated in advance an extensive technical vocabulary.

A fourth point. For Aristotle it goes without saying that political science must evaluate political things. The whole political science of Aristotle—there are descriptive parts, that goes without saying—but the whole pursuit culminates in exhortation and categoric advice: Do this, do not do that. In present-day political science,[27] values are regarded as merely subjective, and therefore evaluation is not possible, is outside the province of political science. The knowledge culminates in prediction, at least it hopes to culminate in that, and at most in hypothetical advice, meaning: If you want to have a free society, do this and this; if you want to have a tyrannical society, do this and this. [xiii] —a free society is preferable to a tyrannical society.

Now the last point, and in a way the most important point. For Aristotle's political science, man is a being with a character of his own, a being *sui generis*. Man is a being with a dignity of his own. We can say, using non-Aristotelian language but as a kind of move towards him, man is the only being of which we know which can be concerned with self-respect. And the proof of that is that man can despise himself. A being[28] [who] can respect himself is also a being[29] [who] can despise himself. That is inseparable. Man is capable of a sense of shame: as a modern called it, "the beast with red cheeks."[xiv] Brutes do not have a sense of shame. And this means that man has some awareness, however dim, of how he ought to live, and if he does not live in accordance with this, he is ashamed of it. In other words, there is a necessary connection between what we call morality, i.e., the view of how man ought to live, and law, because there is a necessary connection between the dignity of man and the dignity of the public order. This means the political is *sui generis*, irreducible to the subpolitical. Man is essentially distinguished from the brutes and from the gods. This view, which might seem to be a special philosophic view, is however the commonsensical view, as you can see from the following example. When the Four Freedoms were proposed by President Roosevelt, there occurred, for example, the freedom from want for all. Now President Roosevelt took it for granted that he demanded freedom from want for all *men*, not for all tigers, or for all rats, or for all lice. He takes this for granted. The implication of all these judgments is, of course, there is a radical difference—not what we call an essential difference, because that is already a highly sophisticated notion, essence. This philosophical notion doesn't have to be, and yet the notion of the fundamental difference between men and other beings may very well be there.

[For] present-day political science, at least the official political science—the individual members are of course free to have their private opinions, but these are only private opinions—there is only a difference of degree between men and brutes. [This is] an immediate heritage from evolutionism, whereas—by the way, evolution does not

[xiii] The tape was changed at this point.
[xiv] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1891), second part, "On the Pitying."

necessarily imply that. Because there may very well be jumps from one type of being to another,[30] [there may] very well [be] an essential difference. Still, there is only a difference of degree between men and beasts or men and robots. You must have read statements to this effect. And the reason is this, and that goes very deep in the modern development. To understand something means, on the basis of modern thought, to understand its genesis or its conditions. Therefore to understand man means to understand man in terms of his genesis or in terms of his conditions. Neither his genesis nor his conditions are specifically human. This notion of science demands the reduction of the human to what humanly speaking is the subhuman. The higher must be understood in the light of the lower, the human in terms of the subhuman, the rational in terms of the subrational (that has become particularly fashionable as the consequence of psychoanalysis), the political in terms of the subpolitical. The political is a mere surface phenomenon, and according to many people you have to dig deeper, i.e., you have to go into the [psychology of] groups or [in]to the psychology of the individuals if you want to understand political life. The institutions, the manifest and explicit purposes of the great political institutions, [all of] that is pushed into the background and cannot supply the key. Political science is logically later than sociology or psychology, and it has been said more than once by some of these people that the independence of political science as an independent discipline is only a hangover from the past, and with the proper progress of sociology, political science will be absorbed by sociology and a few disciplines like public law and international law will have to go to the law schools where they belong.

So this much in the way of a very general description of the fundamental difference between Aristotelian political science and present-day political science. The purpose of this confrontation was not to make a case one way or the other but only to remind you of certain premises.[31] Even if the present-day political science is sound, it is necessary to know what its tacit premises are, and that will become clear only if you know the alternative to present-day political science. The clearest case of that is the Aristotelian political science. I would say that any intelligent adherent of present-day political science simply would have to admit this: that there is no political doctrine comparable in comprehensiveness to Aristotelian political science. Even such a remarkable work as Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, the only modern work which one can compare in breadth to Aristotle's *Politics*, doesn't have the breadth of Aristotle's *Politics*. Now I make a pause before I go on and would like to see to what extent I have made myself understood.

Student: Would you elaborate on the last distinction you made between Aristotelian political theory or political philosophy and political philosophy today? You said that the moderns have reduced the political to the subpolitical . . .

LS: Anyone who has ever seen a political orator knows that the passions are very important, there is no question. But the question is whether you should like to leave it at merely observing the interplay of the passions and thus make predictions on that basis, or whether you should not think about the right use of the passions: which passions, which kind of passions should be aroused, and which kind of passions should not be aroused by the decent statesman. But I think your question was somewhat broader, and I will try to give an answer to the extent to which I understood it. You know what "group politics"

means, what David Truman,[xv] [Bentley], and such people intend.[32] What do they say? The real political phenomena, the serious and substantial things, are groups and their interests. *N* interest groups interested, in all meanings of the term "interest." And then government has to act in some way as a kind of broker. What are the political institutions proper, where do they come in? Where do they come in, in that scheme? They call it the "habit background," [which] is Bentley's term. In other words, such a thing as the Constitution of the United States, the present-day interpretations of the Constitution, that is the habit background. The real stuff is what is going on in Detroit,[xvi] and when a strike situation arises and so on. But if the group struggle is understood as one which should be settled and can be settled by peaceful means, that is of course the most important consideration, that is the habit background. When you have a question[33] [about] the judgment of a statesman, a politician, a president, "Was he wise, unwise, did he have any of the other virtues and vices of the statesman?" —the link-up of that with psychoanalysis, for example, which you find quite frequently stated in the extreme view and therefore giving it deliberately a caricature: You cannot know anything of the wisdom or folly of a statesman if you do not know what kind of affection he received as a baby. Now there may be a connection for all I know or care between what happened in the first year and when he is forty or fifty, but the sensible view of course is [that] whether he was wise or unwise, courageous or cowardly and so on can be established clearly on the basis of the record by people of judgment. How to find reasons for that, whether it was due to faulty toilet training, or to being spoiled, or to congenital stupidity and cowardice, that is a relatively uninteresting question. The interesting question is how is it possible that such a man got elected. That would be the interesting political question, and for that reason you don't need any scientific psychology.

Student: Don't you agree that it's helpful in the case of Congress to know what kinds of backgrounds they come from, to know if someone was raised on a farm, let's say, or if someone comes from a big city background? It would help one to know better why they say certain things.

LS: That would be of some interest, but I would say that an intelligent member of Congress, watching this colleague all the time—I would much more listen to him than to a doctor's thesis on that subject, because after all it depends so very much on judgment [to determine] which particular cases, or actions, or utterances are important or unimportant. Sometimes his action in a given case may be simply due to the fact that he felt the sensible thing to do was the sensible thing to do. Why do I need a further explanation for that? But in other cases it may not be so obvious that it was the sensible thing for an intelligent and patriotic man to do, and then one must indeed see what was the source of error. It could be simple pressure on the part of his constituents against his better knowledge, and it could also be that he himself was confused by the parochialism of his perspective. Sure, that would be of some interest, but I don't believe that this

---

[xv] David Truman (1913-2003), American political scientist, author of *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

[xvi] In the 1950s there was a great deal of volatility in the automobile industry in Detroit: there were both official and "wildcat" workers' strikes due to poor relations with management and working conditions, and there were also periodic shortages of materials.

requires scientific study. I would say an intelligent journalist, a really intelligent journalist and a conscientious man who takes the necessary trouble, I would trust at least as much as the so-called scientist.

Student: I understand you when you say the political scientist builds up to the study of man from beasts and robots. You spoke of Aristotle conceiving man in a qualitatively different way from the gods or the beasts. Would you elaborate a little more fully on that?

LS: You misunderstood me. I said Aristotle starts from the fact that man is essentially different from the beasts and also from the gods. And I don't say he derives him from that—he takes it, that is the starting point. Aristotle could not derive man from anything because he believed, as we now think erroneously, in the eternity of the visible universe. Do you know what that means? There have always been men. Man has always been generated by a father and mother, and there was never a first man, either in the biblical sense, created by God, or in the present-day sense, when at some moment man was generated by non-man. So there is no derivation of man. In the modern view it is understood on the basis of a certain version of evolutionism that man, being derivative from non-man, can be understood ultimately in terms of non-man. I have heard such views: What's the difference between men and brutes, even those closest to him, except that man uses verbal symbols? Now Aristotle would say: What does that mean, verbal symbols? It means he speaks. That is what Aristotle says: Man is the animal who possesses speech. And that requires (and again, very loosely spoken) that he is capable of having concepts, not merely impressions or whatever you call it. And that is a radical difference. It has infinite consequences in every respect, so that any analogy and any attempt to understand human passions, human desires, however low, in terms of what you see in the other species of animals is fundamentally wrong, although it may be illustrated to some extent. There was a famous presidential address by Lasswell a few years ago, where he discussed the question, as if it were one of the most important problems of present-day political science, to see whether human rights must not be given to robots. [xvii] After all, robots can do fantastic mathematical things which no human can do, and other things which they cannot do now but which they can do in short order, and hence they should be treated as such. You can say these are extreme views, not characteristic of the profession as a whole. That is clear. But what is true of the profession as a whole is that the issue of the essential difference between men and non-men is not faced.[34] Therefore the inclination is to understand the human in terms of the subhuman, as I put it, and within political science itself to understand the moral and political in terms of the subpolitical, as mere interests and urges and what have you. I am sure that many examples will come to our mind while we go, because wherever you look you find that.

Student: In relation to your definition of philosophy, I was curious whether because dialectical materialism denies the Kantian thing-in-itself—consciousness being a

---

[xvii] Harold Lasswell (1902-1978), American political scientist who served as president of the American Political Science Association. The presidential address Strauss refers to is "The Political Science of Science: An Inquiry into the Possible Reconciliation of Mastery and Freedom," *American Political Science Review* 50 (1956): 961-979. The passage Strauss refers to is on page 976.

reflection of objective realities—whether you could call it philosophy any more in the sense you just described.

LS: I don't know what professors in Moscow and other places are saying now. Marx himself would not have insisted that it be called philosophy. There are many remarks in his early writings, when he was still engaged in a discussion with philosophy. You know, later on that was settled for him, after 1848 roughly. Then there are remarks to this effect, that philosophy is out: just as in the study of nature we have natural science, now there will be an empirical analysis of social reality, namely, the one which he supplied will take the place of the other parts of philosophy. In the meantime they have found that formal logic is of some use, and they have that and it is taught, and I think some other disciplines, but it really has no life in it. The real thing is of course what they take natural science to be, which is not necessarily what the natural sciences take it to be.

Same Student: That is what I meant . . . philosophy because reality has a position objectively outside the human consciousness.

LS: I know that. You can call it philosophy—that is not particularly important, there are all kinds of philosophies—but how far is it relevant to us? I mean, for argument's sake, let us call Marxism a philosophy. What follows from that, so far as my argument is concerned? One thing you could say [is] that Marxism belongs to an older stratum of Western thought—never forget that it was originally Western—an older stratum of Western thought in which the issue about the fact–value distinction had not yet arisen. Marx has no hesitation to make these value judgments, and there are also statements in Marx already which prepare this tough posture, no value judgments. But that as you know is not the case.[35] One can state the Marxian doctrine on the basis of Marx in moral terms, only Marx would say: That is absolutely uninteresting to me, because any moral teaching means belief in exhortation. When Aristotle describes the virtues in the *Ethics*, that is not a mere description; it is a reminder of how men ought to live, and therefore it has an exhortatory implication. Marx says that doesn't mean a thing, the real thing is the class struggle and an overall notion like this. Most people are "decent" according to the standards of their society. If they say there are criminals and deviants, they are always an exception. If they have become large, it is a sign the society is already in a crisis. But what the content of the decency is, that depends on the economic structure, ultimately. Now if you have a communist society, then the economic structure by itself and the consequence of the economic structure will bring it about that men will naturally be decent in a much more consistent manner than they have ever been before. There will no longer be an opportunity for cheating because there is no longer any private property. That is a crude example. One should state it in much fuller terms, but surely Marxism doesn't claim to be free from value judgments. I mean it depreciates them[36] [insofar as] it says: That is exhortation and that is of no use, what is important is social action. But since social action is necessarily prepared by speech, by propaganda, by appeal, therefore the value judgments come in; and you only have to read what they have to say about the West and about particular trends in the West to see that they are sure that they can make objectively valid value judgments. To develop this one would have to go much further than I can now do, but one thing is clear, that the fact–value distinction emerged in the

last decade of the nineteenth century among bourgeois thinkers in Germany. However Marxism has prepared any indifference to the moral judgments as moral judgments, it has not yet reached that stage.

Student: I understand your criticism of those who would apply psychoanalytic theory to politics, people like Lasswell, who wrote a book called *Psychopathology and Politics,*[xviii] but I have the feeling that your criticism would also be directed more broadly. I may be wrong on this and I would therefore like your comment on whether you feel psychoanalytic theory is equally wrong-headed, so to speak, in being directed toward mental illness and helping people with emotional problems.

LS: Why should I be such a brute? . . . I oppose quackery, but I simply don't know whether psychoanalysis is helping or quackery . . . But the applications to political science are absolutely grotesque.

Same Student: The reason I raised the question . . .

LS: May I say this, they are of course not simple applications of a preexisting theory to political matters. They are based on a very definite political view. Lasswell's overall view, as far as I remember it at the moment, is that the political man as political man, running for office,[37] is a sick man. There is something fundamentally wrong with the wish to have power, which a man who wants to do something as a practical man must possess. And the ultimate dream of Lasswell is an anarchistic society, a society without government. That doesn't follow Freud. I heard a senator in a certain meeting express an opinion. I was absolutely surprised, because this man had never heard of Lasswell—he comes from a rural part of the United States. He said the ordinary people are decent and the whole trouble comes from the politicians. Now he was thinking of course mostly of Khrushchev, but I think he would really have to include all senators except himself. Now I believe there is a kind of old-fashioned, hard anarchism which you can trace to Tom Paine. You know this view of Tom Paine: society takes care of itself, and you need government only for rather marginal functions[xix]—you know, someone gets drunk and starts shooting.[38] I think Lasswell is an heir to this Tom Painean tradition, and he combines that with psychoanalysis. Freud was a very old-fashioned fellow in this respect, you know; he believed in police, and all the things belonging thereto will be necessary as long as there will be men. In other words, Lasswell is not Freud.

Same Student: But when you talk about Freudian theory, are you not also contrasting Aristotle with Freud himself?

LS: It would not be easy to understand Freud's own doing as a scientist in terms of his notion of the human soul—whether reason, understanding, does not belong to the fundamental equipment of man from the very beginning and cannot be deduced from any subconscious, or id, or ego, or what have you, so that science in the Aristotelian sense is an actualization of a potentiality belonging to man as man and a psychological

---

[xviii] *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930).
[xix] *The Rights of Man*, chapter 1.

explanation of all things is absolutely impossible. It is impossible, because you explain something which you always presuppose belongs to you, and if you look at the attempts to give a psychoanalytical account of science, I think you will see . . .

[Due to mechanical difficulties the lecture became inaudible at this point.][xx]

---

[1] Deleted "Now, readings. I gave a list to the bookstore a long time ago and I own [that] I forgot what I put on it. I am sure of one thing: that Aristotle's *Politics* was on it. And for those who don't read the original, the translation by Ernest Barker, Oxford Press, is probably the best.[1] It is distinguished from the original not only because of the language, but also because the original is very concise and Barker is very prolix. But he indicates his additions by angular brackets, and you can always try to forget about the angular brackets and see whether you understand without them.[1] If you don't, then read the angular brackets. But otherwise it is a very useful edition and has a very sensible introduction, and you should use that, by all means. The translation in the Loeb's Classics, by Rackham,[1] is more concise and in some respects superior, but it is very difficult to understand. He doesn't reach the extreme where you understand the English translation only when you read the original, it doesn't go so far, but it is more difficult to follow than Barker's translation. That is the best I can do."
[2] Deleted "as a reading."
[3] Deleted "one would say."
[4] Deleted "the issue."
[5] Deleted "and."
[6] Deleted "is depending."
[7] Deleted "that."
[8] Deleted "these."
[9] Deleted "And."
[10] Deleted "have to."
[11] Deleted "and."
[12] Deleted "but."
[13] Deleted "the."
[14] Deleted "as."
[15] Deleted "the second."
[16] Deleted "That."
[17] Deleted "that."
[18] Deleted "he will."
[19] Deleted "How."
[20] Deleted "And."
[21] Deleted "of prudence"
[22] Deleted "The whole prudent action."
[23] Deleted "that."
[24] Moved "impossible."
[25] Deleted "practical science, is."
[26] Deleted "it follows."
[27] Deleted "the."
[28] Deleted "which."
[29] Deleted "which."
[30] Deleted "and therefore."
[31] Deleted "which."
[32] Moved "Bentley."
[33] Deleted "on."
[34] Deleted "And."
[35] Deleted "Marx surely had a notion—."

[xx] As noted by the transcriber.

[36] Deleted “To that extent that.”
[37] Deleted “political man.”
[38] Deleted “And.”

Session 3: October 9, 1961

Leo Strauss: [1]At the end of the last meeting, quite a few students came up with questions which I thought were of the kind that should be treated openly, because they were not really private questions but questions of the same publicity as those which I have discussed. Now as I told the gentlemen in question, they should put a note or notes on my desk in very legible handwriting or typed, so that I would know what it is about and we could discuss it. Mr. ___ I remember by name. Why did you put it here? It is a waste of time. I see, thank you. Is there anyone else who has a written statement? Well, in the future I think we will simply make this a practice, and if anyone is dissatisfied or confused about a given point and we didn't have the occasion to discuss this point in class, they should put it here. "Is it true," Mr. ___ asks, "that the decline of political theory is due to a decline into historicism on the part of contemporary theorists, or is it rather the case that contemporary political scientists have simply ignored the role of political theory?"

Yes. Well, I believe I have answered that question already, but apparently I did not make myself understood. Contemporary political scientists do not simply ignore the role of political theory. I do not believe there is a single vocal political scientist today who would not admit the necessity of political theory. That is past, the time when people said no theory, [only] facts, because today it is generally admitted that [there are] no facts without theory. The question therefore is not whether theory as such is important, but what kind of theory. The cleavage which exists is this. I believe the majority of political scientists, at least of professional political theorists today, would say that the only legitimate form of political theory is so-called causal theory, which is in effect not much more than methodology, and a minority would say political theory must be normative, otherwise it is not political theory.

Now this has nothing to do with what Mr. ____ called historicism. That is an entirely different thing, which one can superficially and administratively describe as follows: even those who say that political theory can only be causal theory generally[2] say it is reasonable to give courses in the history of political theory or history of political philosophy. There are of course some radical fellows, mostly of the younger generation, who say: Since political philosophy is nonsense, being based necessarily on the illegitimate transition from facts to values, why should we teach it? I mean, let us not be impressed too much by these big names, Plato, Machiavelli, or whoever they are. We have today equally big names. Just as it happens in painting, that Rembrandt or Titian is still more famous than some people now exhibiting in the Art Institute,[i] that is merely an optical illusion, and in a thousand years a fellow from the Art Institute will be as famous as Titian. Or taking our field, Harold Lasswell will prove to be the John Locke of the twentieth century. But still, leaving it at the practical administrative level, it is so consistently [that] most political science departments would say: We ought to have a man who gives a course in the history of political philosophy from Plato to the present time.

[i] The Art Institute of Chicago.

This has deeper reasons, but these reasons are not always thought through. In most cases it is just the famous conservatism, not merely of conservatives but of human beings in general: it is a usage and it didn't do any harm, let us continue it. But that is of course not good enough in the long run. That would be my provisional answer to Mr. ___'s question. But I have to take up the issue of historicism in a more serious sense next week. Generally speaking, it is my plan to devote this week to a discussion of positivism and next week to a discussion of historicism. I believe this is indispensable if we want to have a meeting of minds regarding our theme, classical[3] [political philosophy].

Now since there has been a long weekend, and since we are not yet acquainted (with a few exceptions), I will repeat the main points which I have made in the first two meetings. I started from the famous crisis of our time and said it consists in the fact that we have become uncertain of our purpose, namely, of the modern purpose: of the aspiration toward the universal and just society on the basis of the emancipation of technology and science. The unpleasantnesses and difficulties symbolized by the atomic bomb are the most simple explanation for a return to our tradition, which has taken place in many quarters and which consists of two heterogeneous and even antagonistic elements: the Bible and[4] Greek philosophy or science. As social scientists we are referred back primarily to the classical tradition, to the Greek tradition, and the question which we have is whether the Greek tradition can be of any use to us in our present predicament. If we turn to the academic reflection of this contemporary crisis, we arrive at a more precise formulation. The key thesis of present-day social science is the distinction between facts and values. No knowledge of right and wrong, of good or bad, is possible, only a knowledge of facts, of theories of facts, etc. That means that science is able to increase man's power but is unable to tell man how to use this power. Such is undoubtedly the situation now, and that constitutes the crisis. It becomes therefore necessary to consider the fact–value distinction. If we consider it, we see that this distinction and this question must be put on a broader basis, which I tentatively describe as the relation between the scientific understanding of human things or political things and the commonsense understanding of political things, for the reason given: that for the commonsense understanding the fact–value distinction doesn't exist, and the scientific understanding as[5] [it exists now] is constituted by that distinction. It is obvious that the commonsense understanding of political things is primary and the scientific understanding is derivative, and therefore the commonsense understanding must be taken as the matrix out of which the scientific understanding emerges. We must for this reason have a coherent and lucid understanding of[6] political things as understood by common sense. And I asserted, without proving, that this elaborated presentation of the commonsense understanding is available to us in Aristotle's *Politics* more than anywhere else.

Now in order to lead slowly up to Aristotle's *Politics*, I discussed briefly the distinction between modern and classical thought in [a] most sweeping but I hope not unprincipled or arbitrary manner. I confronted first the present-day view of philosophy with the Aristotelian view of philosophy, and we reached the conclusion that in the present-day scheme the theme of philosophy is man, whereas in Aristotle's philosophy the central theme is God or nature. I leave it at this ambiguous core for reasons which will appear later. I illustrated this difference by two famous examples: the notion of natural law as a

moral law in premodern times, and the rights of man in modern times; and I illustrated it also by the notion of poetry and the other arts as imitation[s] of nature in contrast with the modern view which traces the arts to human creativity. I then contrasted present-day political science with Aristotelian political science, and there the chief point I made was this: for Aristotle there is an essential difference between man and non-man, whereas it is characteristic of present-day political science that it tries to reduce the political to the sociological or psychological, i.e., to the subpolitical. This is connected with the broader issue, not limited to political science but characteristic of all modern science, the understanding of the human in the light of the subhuman. The crudest sign of that, and a sign which is much too crude to be characteristic of the profession, is the importance attached by some famous political scientists, like Herbert Simon, to the observation of the decisionmaking among rats as a key to human decisionmaking. This sounds funny, but it is consistent.

Now how can we reconcile the results of these two confrontations, the confrontation of modern and Aristotelian philosophy and of modern and Aristotelian political science? In modern philosophy the emphasis is on man. In modern political philosophy the emphasis is on the attempt to understand the human in the light of the subhuman, and therefore the political in the light of the subpolitical. I would give this answer: Man becomes the theme of philosophy as contradistinguished from science, because the primary theme of the sciences, nature, proves to be relative to man in the last analysis[7]. Nature proves to be relative to man because it proves to be relative to method. All results of the sciences present themselves as provisional and hypothetical. We do not know nature; we know only a certain range of phenomena, and this knowledge is provisional, subject to revision at every point. The highest principle at which we arrive in our analysis of science is the principle of contradiction, the only principle strictly speaking which is not arbitrary. You can take any mathematical system of axioms and exchange it for another, there is no difficulty. All theories are in principle provisional and radically arbitrary. The only thing which is not arbitrary is the principle governing all possible theories, and that is the principle of contradiction. This is the only absolute which remains, despite the disclaimer of all absolutes. But what is this principle of contradiction? Ultimately they will be compelled to say it is a principle located in the human mind. Beasts don't contradict themselves because they don't speak. We see that the only absolute that remains is man or something human, and to that extent modern thought is consistent by conceiving of philosophy as [the] understanding of man.

Now after this provisional discussion of the issue, we must now try to reach a decision, that is to say, to answer the question whether the fact–value distinction is necessary or tenable. In this discussion I will repeat unintentionally to a certain extent things which I have said in print. In print I said them of course much more precisely and cautiously than[8] is possible or desirable in a classroom. I don't hesitate to tell you where I spoke about that and those of you who are interested may read it: I wrote a book, *Natural Right and History*, chapter 2, and the title essay in a book *What is Political Philosophy?*. Finally I wrote an article, "Relativism," in a book, *Relativism and the Study of Man*, Van Nostrand, 1961.[ii] I don't know whether the library has that.

[ii] The editors of *Relativism* are Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins.

Now the fact–value distinction appears today to be self-evident, as obviously true to [those with even] the meanest capacities, and yet it is of very recent date. Dr. Brecht, in his book which I mentioned to you before,[iii] traced it to the German philosopher-sociologist, Simmel, and to a book of Simmel's, *Introduction to Moral Science,* 1892.[iv] The very term "value," so common now; I know hardly any contemporary who doesn't use it. This term itself is of very recent origin. Contrary to a certain hypothesis, it does not stem from economics. Of course it was always used in economics, but this economic use has no relation [to the philosophical use]. It became a philosophical term only in the 1840s in Germany. The people who used it are practically unknown even in Germany now, to say nothing of outside of Germany. There is only one famous name who used it in a significant way, and this is Lotze[v] . . . It is by no means clear why this term, "value," emerged which no one ever used . . .

[The remainder of the tape is inaudible][vi]

---

[1] Deleted "And I believe that only fifty can find a seat in 305. That would seem to decide in favor of this room, unless the dwindling process proceeds at an unusually fast pace. I do not know what I shall do. I think it is safer, because the reversal cannot be reverted, to leave it at this room and to inform the administration accordingly. And the last point is this."
[2] Deleted "speaking."
[3] Deleted "politics."
[4] Deleted "the."
[5] Deleted "now existing."
[6] Deleted "the."
[7] Deleted "for the following reason."
[8] Deleted "it."

[iii] Arnold Brecht (1884-1977), German jurist and Weimar Republic official, lecturer at the New School beginning in 1933. No prior reference to Dr. Brecht occurs in the extant manuscript. Strauss seems to refer to *Political Theory: The Foundations of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959). A collection of Brecht's essays, *The Political Philosophy of Arnold Brecht*, ed. Morris Forkosch (New York: Exposition Press, 1954), includes the essays "The Rise of Relativism in Political and Legal Philosophy" and "The Myth of *Is* and *Ought*."
[iv] Georg Simmel (1858-1918). Strauss refers to *Einleitung in die Moral Wissenschaft* (Berlin: Hertz, 1892-1893).
[v] Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), German philosopher. His works include *Logik* (Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1843), translated into English as *Logic*, edited by Bernard Bosanquet (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1884), and *Ueber den Begriff der Schönheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoerk und Ruprecht, 1845).
[vi] According to a student's lecture notes, the remainder of this session was devoted to the origins and development of positivism, its influence on utilitarianism, and the origins of the fact–value distinction and cultural relativism. Throughout, Strauss is at pains to demonstrate that it is a mistake to trace the origins of the fact–value distinction to the works of such thinkers as Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Marx.

Session 4: October 11, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: A question from Mr. Seltzer: "Is Max Weber's distinction between facts and values merely an extension from an earlier view, beginning with Machiavelli, that happiness or man's ends are subjective, to the present notion that the conditions of happiness are also subjective? If something like that is the case, could you give a rough indication of why the early modern thinkers were dissatisfied with the ancient view of the objectivity of man's ends?"

That is a very long question which I have to touch on later when I come to explain the differences between Aristotle's principles and the principles of Machiavelli and his followers. For the time being, I can only repeat what I said last time, taking the example of Hobbes. For Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau there was no question that there is an objective teaching regarding values in private as well as in public life, because there is one and only one fundamental desire, the desire for self-preservation. And this desire demands in fundamentally all cases identically the same human habits, say, the habits of peace, of human friendliness or what have you, and it was settled with that. Now today, says Max Weber—but I believe quite a few others would say that is not true—the desire for self-preservation, while playing a great role, is not universally in all cases[1] [and for] all men the leading desire. For example, there are societies, say, warlike societies, which disparage that over-great concern with the individual's self-preservation. Whether that is a good argument or not is another matter, but there is no longer anyone who would say there is one and only one fundamental desire of man, and in addition that this desire gives us a sufficient indication as to what the individual and society ought to do. I believe I cannot say more than that without opening up an infinite question, especially since I have to take up this question anyway.

A question from Mr. Donald Rosenthal: "What would you understand the purposes of science to be? Is Aristotle's common sense in political matters to be distinguished from his scientific approach in other areas? Finally, if Aristotle's understanding of politics is common sense, how is one to distinguish the varieties of common sense from belief in witches, from the idea that the sun moves around the earth?"

These are all very sensible questions, but I have to take them up coherently or, as some people say, systematically. I said at the beginning that my thesis regarding Aristotle's political science as the perfect form of commonsense understanding of political things is open to massive objections and that I will discuss these objections point by point. [On] the first question, only one word. What would you understand the purpose of science to be? What does anyone understand the purpose of science to be today? I have to take that up later. You can say our difficulty is exactly that we[2] no longer have an answer to this question.

---

[i] See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, chapter 2, and Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?" in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), part 1(originally publi shed in Hebrew in 1955).

There are two more questions. One is by Mr. ___. "Is not the fact–value distinction at least in one sense highly traditional? The Western tradition is today a Greco-Christian tradition. Christianity and some forms of Judaism teach that God and man are not of the same substance, that man can think of God only through the *analogia entis*,[ii] that man's apprehension of God is an act of divine grace. If the fact–value distinction were illegitimate, man and God would be of similar substance, Anselm's argument would be a possibility, and, as St. Thomas pointed out of Anselm, if Anselm were right, the argument from the contingency of the world would automatically collapse."

That is a very learned statement, but it is wholly unintelligible to me. That one cannot choose Thomas Aquinas as an authority for the fact–value distinction is written large on every page of Thomas, for the very simple reason that Thomas agrees with Aristotle's teleological view of being. Every being, at least every created being, is by nature directed towards an end. Hence[3] all his actions, all his states of mind or body, are to be judged in terms of[4] [his] specific end. Differently stated, in a teleological doctrine fact and value coincide, because "to be" means to be directed toward an end. The distinction doesn't apply. Mr. ___, where are you?

Student: Here, sir.

LS: Are you satisfied?

Same student: What I meant by the question was[5]: Doesn't the position that facts and values are not different things deny the position that God and man are separate substance[s]? Because for man naturally to know God, in order for that to happen there would have to be a similarity in substance, and then Anselm's argument would be possible, and the other argument from the contingency of the world would collapse.

LS: But look, I mean, this has absolutely nothing to do with what we are speaking of. The distinction between facts and values has absolutely nothing to do with whether the ontological argument is a limited argument . . . because Thomas Aquinas asserts that God really is demonstrable. And there is of course a difference of substance between God and man, namely, the creator and the created.

Same student: But it's a different one from Anselm's argument.

LS: But what has that to do with the fact–value distinction? I mean, you would have to show me that Anselm upheld the fact–value distinction by virtue of believing in the possibility of the ontological proof, and [that] Thomas Aquinas rejected the fact–value distinction by virtue of his rejection of the ontological proof. As soon as you have done this, we will consider it. The fact–value distinction is really not older than fifty or sixty years. There are some little traces of it in writers of the nineteenth century, some even in Marx and so on, but that is not yet the story, that is not yet the developed doctrine.

[ii] "Analogy to being," see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.13.15.

Now I turn to the last statement, by Mr. Butterworth, which is rather long.

> The view was put forth that the basis of political philosophy was a search for something better than mere convention, *nomos*.[iii] I question certainly if this does not run contrary to the idea set forth in the Platonic dialogue *Crito*. In his conversation with the laws of Athens, *nomoi*,[iv] Socrates is reminded that it is they who have engendered him and have permitted him to grow into a seventy-year-old citizen of Athens, and that it would be parricide now for him to turn against them. There is moreover the consideration of the fatherland which Socrates should take into consideration. Later the laws admit that Socrates is the victim of an injustice, but not of an injustice caused by the laws but by men, namely, the Athenian jury. If any laws can be changed, it is probably these manmade rulings. In other words, the laws cannot be changed. But is it possible to ignore or to change the body of laws which has been handed down for ages in the form of convention? In the dialogue *Laws*, it is to be noted that many precautions are taken before the three aged men talk about the *nomoi* under which they have lived. And there is quite often reference made to the fact that only the old men, honest citizens, could over undertake such a discussion. It is also noteworthy that the discussion takes place out of earshot of the youth in the course of a journey.
>
> I would also like to point out what Aristotle says in derogation of those who consider laws to be a mere covenant in the third book of the *Politics,* there and there.[v] Barker[vi] cites Demosthenes, who claims that the *nomoi* wish for the just, the good, and the beneficial. This is what they seek, and this is what, when once it was found, was shown to men as a common injunction, equal for all and alike for all. This is *nomos*, to which it is proper that all men should render obedience. There are many reasons why they should do so, but the chief of them are, first, that law is an invention, [a] gift of the gods; next, that it represents the opinion of sensible men; next, that[6] [it corrects] wrongdoings, whether voluntary or involuntary. And finally, that [it is] the general covenant of a *polis* in accordance with which it is proper that all members of the *polis* should live. Even though Aristotle agrees with the last point, it must be noted that his agreement would carry him to agree with the other reasons adduced by Demosthenes for obedience, for reverence to the *nomos*. Could you please comment on this and show me what points I might be overlooking or wherein you feel that this is an erroneous view?

Well, I cannot do that now. I can only mention one point where I think you are wrong.[7] What you[8] call "from Demosthenes," or rather from Barker's quoting Demosthenes, shows it. *Nomoi* wish for the just, the good, and the beneficial. This is what they seek. But do they find it in all cases? And the law which confronts you directly with its claim to obedience is by no means necessarily in agreement with the just, the good, and the beneficial. In other words, you have to make a distinction between good laws and laws

---

[iii] *Nomos* can mean convention, custom, or law.
[iv] The plural form of *nomos*.
[v] *Politics* 3.31276a6-24 and perhaps 3.12.1282b14-18.
[vi] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), lxxi-lxxii.

which are not good. And this distinction cannot be made on the basis of mere law, because all these, the good laws and the bad laws, are laws in a sense. You have to transcend the law in order to judge the law in terms of goodness and badness. That is ultimately and according to the classical view something like natural law, although the term natural law does not yet occur in Plato and Aristotle for reasons which I will discuss later. I cannot say more now without disrupting my whole course plan. I am sure you would not want me to do that.

Now let us proceed, because we have now to rush a bit. I can state the purpose of the present discussion as follows: We want to understand classical political philosophy. There are obstacles to that. The obstacles are not due to mere ignorance, though that is in a way not an obstacle but a help. You are *tabula rasa* and you are perfectly open. The obstacles have the character of prejudices. There are certain prejudices which prevent us from understanding classical political philosophy as it was meant. The most important, the most powerful of these prejudices I call positivism, and last time I gave a very provisional explanation in order to show you the various elements feeding positivism. By positivism I understand the following[9]: the view that scientific knowledge is the only form of genuine knowledge. This implies in most cases that the model of scientific knowledge is that supplied by the exact sciences, especially physics and chemistry. This view, that scientific knowledge is the only true knowledge, is the doctrine of positivism proper as founded by Comte.[vii] But today it goes on, goes beyond Comte, by asserting that scientific knowledge in any field is limited to facts, relations of facts, and so on and so on, in contradistinction to values.

To repeat this point, and taking up a point raised in one of the questions here, the original meaning of modern science, not only in Comte but at the very beginning in the seventeenth century, did not of course include the fact–value distinction. According to the original view, science in this new sense is for the sake of power—human power, naturally—or as Francis Bacon put it, for "the relief of man's estate."[viii] In other words, science has one and only one overall purpose or end, and the reasonableness of that end, the relief of man's estate, is known. There is no rational alternative according to men like Bacon and Hobbes and many of their successors, including the Utilitarians, to this notion: the relief of man's estate, comfortable self-preservation, the greatest happiness of the greatest number—there are various formulations, but they mean fundamentally the same thing.

Now,[10] however, [we] are confronted with the fact that this notion of the purpose of science is no longer valid for the very simple reason—to speak only of the most massive thing—that[11] in the thermonuclear age brought about by science, the usefulness of science for human well-being as distinguished from human destruction is no longer evident. We[12] no longer have an answer to the question, a general answer to the question, an authoritative answer to the question:[13] Why science? And this is only a special case of

[vii] Auguste Comte (1798-1857), French philosopher and positivist, author of *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842).
[viii] Francis Bacon (1561-1626), British philosopher and statesman. Strauss refers to *Advancement of Learning* (1605), 1. 5.11.

the fact that no value judgments, [such] as the judgment "science is good," are regarded any more [as being] susceptible of genuine validation by reason. We ultimately come back to nonrational preferences: a man becomes a scientist because he likes it, and that is all there is to it; a man turns his back on science and becomes a beachcomber on a Pacific island because he likes it. Now let us look at that and let us first see what the moral effect of a social science thus conceived is. This view clearly implies that all values or all ends are of equal dignity. This manifest and necessary conclusion is sometimes denied, absurdly, I believe. What these people mean is this. I, as a living being, as an acting being, necessarily evaluate. Therefore for me—and "me" means any one of you, of course, and any human being—values are of course of different dignity. If I vote for science, I vote by this very fact against values incompatible with science and so on, and therefore I assert the inequality of values. But that is not the issue. The issue is that if I say there is no knowledge regarding the dignity of anything to be regarded as a value, I say that as far as I know, as far as anyone knows or will ever know, values are all of equal dignity. And that means, if we approach it straight, without any false sophistication, the lowest and meanest fellow is objectively not inferior to the noblest and wisest man. He has this value, this fellow: to do the best for his belly. That is as legitimate as the highest value as anything else. All preferences are equal. The man who finds his satisfaction in combining as frequently as possible rape and murder, or the miser without kith and kin who dedicates his whole life to amassing the largest number of banknotes, is in no way intrinsically[14] [inferior], objectively[15] [inferior], to the most thoughtful philanthropist.

Now to see the absurdity of that,[16] with the help of Aristotle if that is required, I read to you a single passage. I read simply a translation; it is at the beginning of book 7 of the *Politics*.[ix]

> For no one would call a man blest [i.e., most happy—LS] that has not got a particle of courage nor of temperance nor of justice nor of wisdom, but is afraid of the flies that fly above[x] him [such a coward—LS], cannot refrain from any of the most outrageous actions in order to gratify a desire to eat or to drink [the opposite of temperance—LS], ruins his dearest friends for the sake of a farthing [no justice—LS], and similarly in the matters of the mind,[xi] is as senseless and mistaken as any child or lunatic. But although these are propositions which when uttered everybody would agree to, yet men differ about amount and degrees of value.

In other words, certain difficulties arise in spite of this fundamental agreement which is universally true. And that is the opposite view: that everyone, not necessarily in every moment, but everyone coming to think of it, will see that. Some people need the experience and have never[17] [had] it, but they are incompetent to that extent. But [that] any man who is not completely stupid or completely inexperienced could deny that, that

---

[ix] Strauss reads, with some deviations, from *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 1323a28-36.
[x] In original: "flutter by"
[xi] In original: "intellect"

is impossible. And I think we would have to argue it out on this basis. Now by denying these simple things of which every human being who is not completely stupid or inexperienced is aware, this kind of social science leads to what is ordinarily called nihilism. There is no longer any possibility of orientation. This is not quite sufficient, because this view of the equality of all preferences acts necessarily to the advantage of the lowest, of the gutter, for an effort is needed either to get out of the gutter or to stay out of it, and these efforts are sapped by the teaching that it does not make any difference. One can also state this in various other ways. For example, self-respect, a term frequently used, presupposes you cannot respect yourself if you have not the possibility of despising yourself and that there are things which you would be ashamed to do. But the teaching of the fact–value distinction amounts to this: there is nothing of which one ought to be ashamed. Well, they say: If you vote for temperance as a value (but that is entirely your arbitrary preference), then you have to be ashamed of being intemperate (but you don't have to vote for temperance in the first place). There is nothing wrong with that.

Still, there is some value which seems to be granted by this school, and that is the value called rationality. What that means is this: there are the values, or the ends, however you call it. This is not susceptible of rational discussion, of rational decision. But the means[18] [to] this value can be determined. In other words, if your value is to live as long as possible and that is your chief consideration—valetudinarian, you know, only to live as long as possible; regardless of whether you have lost all the people to whom you are attached, you are willing to live to 140 years and have no colds in the meantime—the means to this end can be fully determined rationally, in this particular case by medicine.[19] Rationality means the rational man is not he who chooses the right means for the right ends, but who chooses the right means for any end he happens to fancy. That miser I spoke of before acts rationally if he really, taught perhaps by Jack Benny,[xii] finds out all methods[20] [by] which one can save; and he acts irrationally if he would go on spending sprees—quite irrationally from the point of view of the miser. So rationality like this exists only regarding the means, not the ends. But that is something which seems to be esteemed.

But the question comes up here in the same way: Why should I be rational? Why should I be rational? I desire the end A. That end A can be achieved only by the means B. Let this means be an effort, a very general formula. But I loathe effort, that is my value. A very simple case: So there is a conflict between my end, whatever that may be, and my real hatred of the disvalue effort. So in other words, rationality is as arbitrary a choice as irrationality. The practical effect of this position is not necessarily nihilism, of course, because people do not act perfectly on their theoretical principles because of the great force of habit or, differently stated, of intellectual laziness. The practical effect is in most cases this amiable vice called conformism. You don't think, you simply go along with the others. That is as defensible, of course, as to act differently—I mean, one value is equal to any other. For example, be a democrat in a democratic society, and if the society turns totalitarian, you are totalitarian. It is as easy as that. Well, I would also say it has a degrading effect because it destroys, again, the moral stamina of the individual.

[xii] Jack Benny (1894-1974), American comedian and film, radio, and television personality. Benny often played the part of the comical miser.

The so-called value-free assertions have necessarily an effect on evaluation. Take such a key term in present-day social science as "culture." You must have heard of that, especially in anthropology and sociology, but it is affecting all areas. I am sure that the economists also speak of cultures by now. Now culture originally was a value concept. It meant the cultivation of the human mind, and the cultivation of the human mind meant to make[21] [the] best of the most valuable thing man possesses: the mind. So culture was something to be looked up to. For reasons which we may discuss on a later occasion, it became fashionable in the nineteenth century to use the term culture in the plural. Up to about, say, the 1800s, culture was always used in the singular: the culture of the human mind. In the nineteenth century people began to speak of cultures, meaning that there are *n* equally estimable ways in which the mind can be cultivated. Say there is a Chinese culture distinguished from Western culture: there is no reason why we should say that Western culture is superior to Chinese culture. This view became particularly popularized by Spengler's *Decline of the West*, in which he gives you a presentation of a number of cultures—a small number, I forget exactly how many he has, roughly ten. Then this was enlarged by Toynbee.[xiii] I don't know how many he has, but it was somehow still understood [that there were] high cultures: a value judgment. In other words, if you take an Indian tribe on this continent, perhaps even in South America, these were still referred to in these older times as primitive people, which meant a value judgment, not to say "savages."

But then people simply said: Why should not the mores of some South American Indian tribe in the Amazon Valley, headhunters and I don't know what,[22] [be] as good a culture as Chinese or Hindu or Western [culture]? That is what anthropology is trying to do today. That is of course not a merely theoretical teaching; that is meant to have a moral impact, a kind of democracy of cultures. But that has still some meaning. But then it was taken over by the sociologists, and then you find these interesting notions of culture where you can speak of the culture of a juvenile gang, perhaps. Yes, suburbia, the culture of suburbia. You must have heard of that, [the] culture of human juvenile gangs. A juvenile gang may be delinquent or not delinquent, but [it is a] culture in both cases. And then I say the last step, which I believe no one has yet taken but it is about to be taken any day, and that is the culture of the inmates of a lunatic asylum, because they have different mores, I suppose, than anyone else has. That is, you see, an example, and that is I think one of the best examples of how a value concept, [what was] originally a value concept, by becoming free of evaluating implications degrades everything. Because naturally, when you have applied culture to suburbia and you apply the same term backward to Periclean Athens, Periclean Athens is bound to suffer from that. You can't help that. The simple formula is that thinking doesn't take place in a vacuum. If you do this within academic halls and say "only in my capacity as a social scientist and not as a citizen," that won't do, because thinking is not subject to administrative regulations.

By the way, there are many terms of this kind, for example, personality. Goethe said in a poem, whether that is a very good poem is another matter, but he said it: "Personality is

---

[xiii] Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975), British historian. Strauss refers to his *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934-1961).

the highest bliss for the children of earth, for men."[xiv] In other words, the highest bliss, and[23] [that] means also a very high achievement, or a very rare grace or whatever it may be. Today what does "personality" mean? Everyone has a personality, of course. When these people make personality studies, that implies that everyone has a personality; no effort of any kind is needed. It has ceased to be a value term. It has become a purely descriptive or analytical term, but this means by the very act a debasing. A certain dimension of reality is excluded from sight. Another term is charismatic, which originally was of course a value term: to have a charisma, to have a grace, divine or natural. When Max Weber, who introduced it as a technical term into sociology, said "a charismatic leader," for example, that means only that he is regarded by his followers as an outstanding man. He may be the greatest fake, that doesn't make any difference. He took the example of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons,[xv] and said: That is uninteresting, whether he was a genuinely religious genius or whether he was only a very clever swindler. That is absolutely uninteresting for the sociologist, because the only thing which counts is how his followers regard him. That is another example.

In some cases, of course, the old terms won't do. There is some resistance which apparently culture, personality, charisma, and other terms do not have. The most striking example which occurs to me is "conscience." I believe the term conscience has lost its standing in [the] social sciences, [but] not, however, the undeniable empirical fact of guilt, at least in the form of guilt feelings. That no empirical student can deny, that there are from time to time people who have guilt feelings. Now guilt feelings were traditionally understood in terms of something like a bad conscience, but that is out. The place of the conscience is taken by the superego. The consequence is that in practice you will not make a distinction between guilt feelings as a merely pathological phenomenon, in other words, wholly unfounded feelings ("use your head, you are not guilty"), and men who should have guilt feelings because they truly did wrong. Take an extreme case, a man who has done an irreparable harm to another man and says: There is no way of getting rid of that except by devoting my whole life to repairing that. That is one case of that. An irrational guilt feeling without any foundation is of course something entirely different, but by using these concepts the distinction loses its importance.

Another example: No common good. There cannot be a common good. Why? Because whatever people may say,[24] common good necessarily presents itself as something higher than the merely private good. You can't get away from that. The consequence is [that] there is no common good, only group interests. That is a fact. There are group interests: the entrepreneur, the laborers, the farmers, etc. The consequence of the denial of the common good is that of course[25] pursuing the group interest by hook and by crook is unblameable, and naturally that weakens the restraint on group egoism. For as I said before, social science does not exist in a vacuum. It is a human activity, the activity of willing and evaluating beings, and this evaluating is necessarily affected by what men are taught or think. By the way, in this particular case, that of the common good, one can show the impossibility in a very simple way. Quite a few of these people[26] say the

---

[xiv] Goethe, *West-östlicher Diwan* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1819), Suleika Nameh.

[xv] Joseph Smith (1805-1844), founder of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. His *The Book of Mormon* was published in 1830.

common good is impossible because a common good presupposes a whole (the society, the country, or however you call it), but there are no wholes; there are only individuals, or maybe groups, for some reason. But these same people, or some of them, speak of the "open society." Now the open society is only one special version of the good society, their understanding of the good society. But the good society, that exactly is what was meant by the common good. You can get away from these difficulties if you try hard, there is no question. I mean, if someone is trying hard to say he will do nothing but count how many people have black hair, how many people have blonde hair, how many are bald, and so on, he can do that. He can also count prostitutes and lunatics, and count Ph.D.s or whatever. That can be done. But if he tried not to arbitrarily limit himself to very small segments, which in themselves are entirely meaningless, if he speaks of the task of social science as a whole or political science as a whole, he comes necessarily up against these questions where a value-free social science is not possible.

I would like to discuss this now from a different point of view. Hitherto I have spoken in a very general way of the moral effects of a value-free social science, if this is taken seriously. One thing I don't have to tell you, at least those who have ever tasted social science in action, [is] that in fact the social scientists, almost all of them, are happily inconsistent. In other words, they are people who use their heads. They have definite preferences which in fact they do not regard as merely arbitrary preferences. That comes out from time to time, but I am not concerned now with doing justice to this or that individual, as I would do if I had to speak of them; I am speaking now of a certain idea of a science, whether this idea in itself makes sense. Yes?

Student: The examples you are using are not really examples you would draw from the positivists themselves. Contemporary positivists have an almost unbelievable contempt for social science.

LS: But excuse me. What does culture mean in present-day anthropology? It is completely value-free, as I said. Or do you mean to say . . . What do you understand by positivism?

Same student: The logical positivists, say, the Vienna School, for example. They would never concede that present-day anthropology is value-free.

LS: That is very simple. I have read some of these people, believe me. When I had more time and could give a course in basic problems of political philosophy, I invested weeks in discussing Ayer,[xvi] Reichenbach,[xvii] and such people. We [do not] have[27] the time now. Regardless of everything else, what does it mean that there are so-called professors of philosophy, not of the social sciences, who raise certain demands of what scientific method is without ever applying them? I would say I respect much more the logical positivist in action, the man who tries to apply the methods, than the man who preaches

[xvi] A. J. Ayer (1910-1989), British philosopher, best known for his book *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936).
[xvii] Hans Reichenbach (1891-1953), German philosopher, whose many works include *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

the things which in practice would be impossible. I mean, I know positivists who draw a certain conclusion which is in a way respectable, namely, social science as now practiced, even any social science, is nothing compared with symbolic logic or mathematics. That is a possibility. But we are not concerned with these people because we—I suppose as a tacit premise we are interested in political and social matters, and sufficiently interested to believe that it is possible to have knowledge of them. Now if some mathematician or logician comes and says there is no knowledge of them, then we would argue that out with him, and we could tell him some things. That is not quite true. We can show that certain statements made about political things are wrong, [that] others are true, and there are criteria of truth and untruth—that there is knowledge of political things. I mean, that [position] is an extreme and unjustified skepticism. But at the present I am rather concerned with something else. These logical positivists[28] are in their pure form inhabitants of philosophy departments, not of social science divisions. You know that. But to the extent to which they stay entirely within the realm of logic, I am not now concerned with them. But they have a terrific effect on social science. There is a very powerful school, at least in this country, within [the] social sciences which swears to the principles of logical positivism.

Same student: This is the point I am driving at. The strict logical positivists will say these people can't be called logical positivists, they are empiricists. They are attempting to misuse science. They are attempting to apply certain insights logical positivists feel they have [made] to something entirely outside. In effect, these people are breaking down the fact–value distinction.

LS: Who?

Same student: Well, practically any contemporary political scientist, or behavioralist—

LS: I am very sorry,[29] [but] you are mistaken. Some people from time to time make such a remark. It is not strictly speaking tenable. But I have not seen that someone has really clearly drawn the consequence and stood up against that. I believe that my presentation of the state of the discussion is really correct. What you can say is this: there is in this country—and that has nothing to do with logical positivism—there is in this country still a considerable body of opinion of utilitarian origin and more directly of Deweyite origin, and they of course reject the fact–value distinction. It is easy to show on the basis of Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*[xviii] that Dewey in fact rejected it. But this is the rear guard.[30] The most serious of these people dealing with the subject and not making methodological statements merely is a man called Stevenson—not Adlai Stevenson,[xix]

[xviii] John Dewey (1859-1952), American philosopher. Strauss refers to his *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1921).

[xix] Adlai Stevenson II (1900-1965), American politician, governor of Illinois, twice the losing Democratic nominee for President (1952 and 1956). At the time of this course in 1961, he was the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

but [a man] somewhere in the state of Michigan, Charles Stevenson.[xx] I forgot the title of the book. *Ethics and Language*, yes. And here you see a Deweyite about to shed the last relics of his Deweyism in favor of strict logical positivism. That is much more characteristic, I believe, than anything else in the country.

Student: If most social scientists don't regard preferences as arbitrary when they are talking in commonsense discussions, how do they reconcile their common sense with their science when they are confronted with the problem?

LS: That I do not know. But the view which you hear most frequently is this: Of course common sense is not altogether despicable, you know. For example, if I say, "We are here in a class, in room 122," that is not a scientific statement, but anyone in his senses would say that is a true statement. But the trouble is that in ordinary common sense there is also a lot of prejudice. The favorite example that comes up is witches. I state this view as follows: We have commonsense knowledge of broomsticks, no question, but in common sense we also have the view that witches ride on brooms. In other words, common sense is really not able to give an account of the difference between witches and broomsticks, between something which is not and something which is. Therefore the clearest and the only consistent way is to throw out common sense and say the only genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge. This would lead to such interesting consequences, for example by Ayer. I remember—the example is mine, but the principle is his—that, as all of you know, Nazi Germany collapsed in 1945. Most of us know even a bit more than that, but this fact is I think well known. Now according to the strict rules of method, this fact, this knowledge, is subject to revision. Strictly speaking, we have to begin our next study where this fact would have to come up, and first make sure that Nazi Germany in fact collapsed in 1945—which is absurd, of course. No social scientist, I believe, would in practice suggest that. The question is [about] the conclusions that are drawn, whether it is explicitly admitted that commonsense understanding,[31] commonsense knowledge, is genuine knowledge, and not only genuine knowledge but is such knowledge without which political science or social science is altogether impossible. If we do not accept that, this fact will not be easily . . . because it has very, very great consequences.

Student: Would it follow from what you said that logical positivists would say the following: that all ethical statements—that is, all statements concerning value—are in fact meaningless?

LS: As a matter of fact, there were some times when they said that. There was some time when Ayer, among other people, seemed to say that ethical and religious statements are meaningless statements. It was necessary for them to say that because if there are meaningful statements which are not scientifically verifiable or the opposite, then there is a large realm of meaning outside of science. And by this very fact science becomes

---

[xx] Charles L. Stevenson (1908-1979), American philosopher. Strauss refers to his book *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944). Stevenson's work focused on the relation between moral language, reality, and knowledge.

problematic, because someone can very rationally say [that] all important things are outside of science—in poetry, in novels, in religion; I don't care now what differences there may be—and not in science. In order to exclude that, in order to preserve the dignity of science and the rank of science, they were compelled to say at a certain stage that only statements which are in principle scientific, namely, that they can be verified or confirmed or disconfirmed according to scientific methods,[32] [are] meaningful.[33] They were compelled to give it up, but I can only say, the noise with which they asserted it is in no proportion to the absence of noise with which they abandoned it, and you know it more or less disappeared. There is a simple specimen—I cannot go into that now, because we have to come to Aristotle—there is a book by Ayer whose title I forgot, which made quite a furor when it appeared originally. [It] was quite a breakthrough and all that kind of thing.

Student: *Language, Truth, and Logic*.

LS: Yes, I have it in my office. And there is a preface to that book, a preface to the second edition in which he retracts all [of his] characteristic theses, *all* characteristic theses on the basis of simple observations which he should have made while writing the first edition, and yet [he] reprints the first edition.[xxi] What you said is perfectly true, a logical positivist teaching logical positivism in a philosophy department is not committed to social science. Such a man can very well say that the only real science is mathematics, perhaps mathematical physics too, but social science is just an amateurish affair. I can see that. I have seen such people, but they are of no interest to us here as such because they deny something which we know is possible, namely, knowledge of social matters. And you can say they are in a way even nicer men than their followers within social science. That I would consider, but that is not to the point. Do I make myself clear?

Student: Yes, except that the nature of their criticism of the social sciences still has a meaning in the sense that the criticism boils down to the fact that they hold that the social scientists, and political scientists included, are too involved in their roles as teachers of ethical values and not enough involved as students of ethical values.

LS: Oh, but then I must say that all the young Turks, if I may call them [that], in the political science profession would go down on their knees and say: You are right, and we are trying to do that. Teaching is really nothing. The main point is to do research, and to train young people in social science research, and [to] apply game theory toward the study of domestic politics and foreign politics and so on. These people exist. And I have them in mind, and what I say is only what comes out of that. Is it possible, is it fruitful in any sense to treat political matters in this way? But you must give me a long rope to hang myself. I only began now.

Now I spoke first in a very provisional manner of the moral effect of the fact–value distinction. I raise now[34] [this] question. Someone could say: Well, who cares for

---

[xxi] *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936). Ayer reprinted the first edition of the book (1936) unchanged. In the preface to the second edition (1946), Ayer admits that he was compelled to use value judgments.

morality, who cares for moral excellence? I am interested only in the scientific treatment of social matters regardless of what it does to man. All right, is it possible to have a social science on the basis of the fact–value distinction as it has been described? According to this view, what you can expect at the most and what you should insist upon is ultimately causal explanations. For example, a certain economic crisis. Well, "crisis" is not a value judgment but objectively describes a kind of disequilibrium or whatever else they would say, and that is not a value term, just as a "mechanical disequilibrium" is not a value term. And of course going [along] with causal explanation—and that is in a way the justification of it—is the possibility of prediction. If I know that these and these series of events is a function of these and these series of events—if I have established that, then I can predict whenever this series appear, series number one, then it is likely to be followed [with] this and this degree of probability by that and that series of events.

Now let us look at this, how it works. I take first an example which is wholly outside of political science narrowly conceived and taken from sociology. Sociology has many subdivisions, as you know, and one of them is sociology of art. Now let us take a sociologist who is really interesting and who is making a study, and then you look at the book. You see all the examples he has used are examples of trash as distinguished from art. Well, an intelligent man would say that is not sociology of art, and since I happen to be interested in that, I throw the book away as useless. The distinction between art and trash is a value distinction. Without making that distinction, you cannot say anything about either art or trash. You put incommensurable things in the same heap. There are people, [sociologists], who are very much interested[35] in what they call popular culture. What does popular culture mean? I suppose it means film, radio, TV, and what is going on in country fairs and so on. Now why do they say popular culture? Because they have an inkling that culture originally meant something different, something which requires an infinitely higher effort of the mind and the heart on the part of both the creators and their audiences. In other words, you cannot understand what popular culture as such is without thinking of culture without that qualifying adjective, popular. That is a value judgment. I mean, if you try to stand on your head and you are really clever, you can prolong the argument for hours and hours, but ultimately[36] [what] will come out [is] what common sense would have told you at the beginning.

Another example.[37] Some of these things I discussed in print; I am sorry that I cannot do better now than repeating them. Max Weber asserted, as some people have done before him, that the movement called Puritanism had an adverse effect on music in England. I know nothing of the facts, I simply take it as an example. What he meant was that prior to Puritanism, England could boast of [having] a very high form of music, but after Puritanism had broken in, that[38] disappeared. They had to import continentals like Handel and so on to have high-class music. Puritanism had an adverse effect on music. But the causal explanation is meaningful only on the basis of value judgments, not on the basis of mere reference to values. It really means that a high form of religion—that was Weber's view regarding Puritanism—a high religious impulse had an adverse effect on a high form of art. If you had the case of a languishing superstition which led to the substitution of one kind of trash for another kind of trash, that would be an entirely different case. I know from experience that there are people who would be as much interested in the latter

case as in the former case, but there are all kinds of people. But the sensible thing of course is to be interested much more in the things which deserve interest, because it shows[39] a deep problem that a high religion could have a blighting effect on something high like art, rather than [being interested in] what is going on on a very low level. Although if you are practically concerned with it as an administrator, or as a human being living in these circumstances, you will of course be interested, but you still must see your situation properly, and that you cannot do except on the basis of value judgments.[xxii]

Student: —by saying I won't make a distinction in what is art and what is trash, or what is good music and what is trash, but I will accept the judgment of society as to what is good music and what is art, and I will proceed from there to study it.

LS: That we could say that and quite a few other things, I do not deny. But just as a man says, "I am perfectly satisfied with compiling an alphabetical directory, say, of all political scientists, or of all inhabitants of the South Side, and find my satisfaction in that, in making this as thoroughly and competently as possible" . . . But we are speaking now not of individual preferences in a sphere where individual preferences are perfectly in order but of the idea of a science, social science, which wants to understand society, and that is impossible if he does not see properly the ups and downs of society. You say: I do not judge, I take the judgment of the society. What does that mean? You get into troubles on that score, because there are various opinions within society. There are people who say: The first thing I want to know when I look at a painting, I want to know what it is. Then an abstract painter comes and you can't know: Is it a man, is it a horse, is it a cowboy? You can't know. Which of these opinions do you regard as authoritative? Well, you would have to say the people who have a true understanding of art. That is a value judgment. It is no longer possible by more mechanical methods.

Student: Are you saying or implying that Max Weber, in studying the effect of Puritanism on music, was calling Puritanism a high form of religion?

LS: There is a page in *Natural Right and History* where I took the trouble to enumerate all the evaluative terms.[xxiii] I don't know how many there are. It is an amazing number. I think that was wise of Weber. The only trouble was that this was in glaring conflict with his methodological principles. In practical social science Weber was much wiser than as a methodologist. Certain things we cannot see without evaluating, which doesn't mean that you will always evaluate rightly. But let me finish my argument, and we shall later discuss it.

I take another example, also from Max Weber, which I found particularly revealing. I call it the case of the blundering general. No particular blundering general was meant, he took it only as a typical example. A military historian, a political historian, has to deal for example with a campaign, with a military campaign. He wants to give a causal explanation. Some general did something which is unintelligible and which, say, led to disaster, and it is his duty as a social scientist to give a causal explanation. Now what

[xxii] The tape was changed at this point. The recording resumes with a student's question.
[xxiii] *Natural Right and History*, 51.

does he do? Weber says in the first place he must construct a model of perfectly sensible or rational action in the circumstances. Then it is clear: if the general had acted according to the model, the causal explanation would be finished. The general acted as a sensible general would have to act in the circumstances. Nothing else is needed. But he did not act that way. Why? Here we come to the causal explanation needed because of the blunder. He may have been drunk, he may have had a heart attack, he may have had some troubles with his wife—*n* possibilities. Or there may have been some breakdown in communications also, and *n* other [possibilities].[40] That is [a] causal explanation. Now Weber admits here, somewhat shamefaced, that when we have made this observation that his action did not comply with the standard of rational action, that we have to admit he made a mistake: [a] value judgment. And of course, if you find him doing that all the time, then the value judgment will become even more strong and you will say that he was an entirely inept fellow.

Now let me finish.[41] Weber admits this is a value judgment. He says we are concerned with that. But he says that we are concerned as social scientists only with causal explanations. The admission is important. We have here a rational value judgment, and Weber cannot deny its possibility and necessity. But he says we don't want it. We are not concerned with it. I put this as follows, and I can only repeat that: we must behave like good children. We should not notice things which we could not help noticing when passing by. I would say it seems to me that a social scientist, a political scientist, a military historian, or whatever it may be, learns much more from that[42] [which] is implied in the value judgment, I mean what is ineptness or excellence in this particular field, by understanding the ways of military wisdom and the ways of military folly in this particular case, than by these absolutely uninteresting causal explanations: was it his mistress, was it whisky, or whatever. We know[43] in advance that these kind of things can disturb a man. If one knows that in a particular case, this man should never be given a responsible position. Now you have your point.

Student: I understood you to say that calling something a mistake was making a value judgment. Is that right?

LS: Yes.

Same student: I don't understand why.

LS: Because you cannot arbitrarily isolate it. I mean, what would *you* say it is when I say he made a mistake?

Same student: I would say given certain ends, he went through the incorrect means to arrive at them.

LS: Yes, but look, is this not a defeat? I mean, for example,[44] if I would be asked now in an emergency to pilot an airplane, I can tell you in advance that I would make terrific mistakes because I know nothing of it. If you would say you would not blame me for that because I don't pretend to be a pilot, is that it? Is that what you mean?

Same student: Well, I might do that, but I don't see how that is related to the point.

LS: But excuse me, if someone who by his very being, as being a general, pretends to be competent, is he not by his very being subject to a value judgment regarding his competence?

Same student: No, I don't think so. I don't know why that should follow. Given certain ends—

LS: But he admits these ends. He says this: This is the standard by which I want to be judged. He does this by having the general's own uniform on. And this is not only the arbitrary view of this guy because someone might put a general's uniform on him as a swindler, but this is the judgment of everyone understanding anything of the society in question. I would say of any society—they don't have to be general's uniforms, they can be some other things, but it is clear there is no society, no political society which doesn't have an army, which doesn't need leaders in an army. And there are certain qualities which are required in order to be a good leader in an army. The value judgments would be arbitrary if they were wholly unrelated to the situation. You know, if you would say, for example, that this general in meetings makes doodles, and they are very poor, inferior to [those of] a four-year old, and you would say you judge the man in these terms, that would be absurd, because he himself doesn't take it seriously. No one takes it seriously. But these value judgments belong to the situation. I have to take up this subject a bit later on a somewhat more general basis. What is a value judgment in your view?

Same student: A value judgment refers to ends. Would you accept that, given your schema? What a mistake refers to in the instance of the general refers to means, the same way you can say that if you want the drink of water, and go to a well and drink poison, you have made a mistake. But that has nothing to do with a value judgment.

LS: All right, did you ever hear the word virtue, or excellence?

Same student: Oh, I've heard of it.

LS: Have you also heard that one could say virtue or excellence is an end, that[45] [this] is one possible view?

Same student: Virtue or excellence as an end? Virtue or excellence in what?

LS: Well, for example, excellence in understanding, excellence in fellow-feeling.

Same student: I've heard of that as an end.

LS: Good. All right. But let us see. If a man, in our case the general, in his choice of means always makes a mistake, [then] he is inept, he is stupid, whatever the special form of ineptness it may be. He lacks the excellence of a man of mind, or whatever you call it,

which is required by the situation and which we would say generally is an excellence. In other words, choice of means to ends one could say is the most important sphere of excellence and its opposite.

Same student: But even the positivist would say that.

LS: Yes, but the positivist wouldn't draw the conclusions from that. The positivist, what would he say—the positivist would not admit that.

Same student: But certainly someone like C. L. Stevenson[xxiv] would say someone made a mistake, even though he might not recognize meaningfulness in ethical terms.

LS: The question is, does he draw the necessary conclusions from this admission? That is the question.

Same student: If you are the most noble character and I am the most base character, and we both look at this general who has led his troops into this very foolish battle and has lost them all or something, it seems to me that we can both say that he made a mistake, having completely different values ourselves, and that almost anybody looking at the same situation would say that he made a mistake. Now doesn't this weaken a little bit the idea that his mistake necessarily is a value judgment, identifying it as such?

LS: Yes, but let us simplify the matter. [Suppose] that we are not concerned with a single mistake (it is fundamentally the same thing) but with a series of mistakes, so that the judgment he is inept, he is stupid, is absolutely proven by our empirical analysis of his actions. I say that is [a] value judgment. It doesn't necessarily prove that he is dishonest if you limit it to moral virtue in a very narrow sense. That is another matter. There are also ways of judging[46] that. I mean, sometimes a man can prove someone else is dishonest and a crook, etc. And the question which is in your mind ultimately is this: Cannot generalship as such be rejected? That is what you are driving at. That is what Max Weber ultimately meant. Then in the extreme case, to be a first-rate general might mean [no] more than [being] a first-rate crook, a first-rate thief. That one could say. I will take this up later. But proceeding soberly and empirically we do not come up against this question so easily. We come up against the question of the great statesman, etc.

I give you some other examples. The late President Roosevelt is a controversial figure, as you know—an interesting example of the complexity of value judgments. But what does that mean? In Miss Perkins's book[47] *The Roosevelt I Knew*,[xxv] I found this little story. She had to prepare a speech for him on social workers' stuff, I forgot what it was, and of course Roosevelt knew nothing of these matters, and she knew everything about it and she elaborated it. Roosevelt read this speech as she wrote it, with one change. She had said: We want to have an "all-inclusive society." Roosevelt changed it to: We want to have a "society from which no one is left out." I contend this shows the level of

---

[xxiv] See n. xx above.

[xxv] Frances Perkins (1880-1965), U.S. Labor Secretary from 1933-1945. Strauss refers to her book *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Viking, 1946).

Roosevelt, that he could see how a little word makes all the difference in a political speech: whether you use the somewhat highfalutin' thing, "all-inclusive," or whether you use a term which every citizen, however unlearned, will understand: "a society from which no one is left out." And part of his very great political success is intelligible on the basis of this single text. Understanding that means making value judgments. Now of course there are other things. There is the story of Yalta. One could say that very great blunders were made by President Roosevelt, not merely because one happens to like Barry Goldwater,[xxvi] but because when one studies Harry Hopkins's papers as edited by Sherwood,[xxvii] when one reads these simply, with some thinking of course, one sees here that there were certain statements of Roosevelt which were not even in the circumstances defensible, not [just] in hindsight. One can even prove that they were not in the circumstances defensible. Great blunders. But you see the point is this, here: we are not confronted with the impossibility of value judgments but with the possibility and necessity of value judgments which, however, contradict one another at certain points. You see, they are all rational judgments, great plusses, great minuses, and then if you try to come to an overall judgment, you naturally tremble on the basis of the rationality of the value judgments, not because value judgments in themselves are not rational.

Let me first conclude this part of the argument. The general point which is implied in what I said is this, but I believe it is important to raise all questions, all relevant questions, surely, and not to be blind in any way. But one must also raise them in the proper place, that is a part of proper procedure. What I said hitherto about this subject can be reduced to this general statement: It is impossible to understand human things without evaluating. I mean, it is possible to collect isolated data without evaluating, that goes without saying, but that is not social science. That is only subsidiary or ancillary to social sciences. Take a simple case, and I know you will jump at me. You read a social science article, say, an article out of the *APSR*.[xxviii] I contend you cannot read it, understand it, without evaluating. For example: Here he forgets this obvious fact; there, this doesn't follow. And if this happens all the time, you say: This is a lousy article. And in another case: He makes a point; or,[48] I have never heard [that] before. Or: This is an important point, that is a stimulating article. All value judgments. And that applies to political science as well.

There are things which are much too uninteresting to be evaluated. For example, one of us goes to buy a shirt. If we would apply our minds to it, we would probably say it was a wholly permissible action from every point of view: he paid for it, he needed it, and so on and so on. All value judgments. But ordinarily we don't care, because we take these things for granted. I rush to the essential points. You will say: Sure, this man who wrote the article in the *APSR* accepted by this very fact a standard of judgment. He wanted to write and to do something valuable on the premise that science or social science is of

---

[xxvi] Barry Goldwater (1909-1998), five-term Arizona Senator and the Republican presidential candidate in the 1964 election.

[xxvii] Harry Hopkins (1890-1946) was a close advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Strauss refers to Robert E. Sherwood's *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1948).

[xxviii] The acronym for the political science journal, *American Political Science Review*.

value. This is his ultimate value which he does not justify and which no one can truly justify, because if it is justifiable, if you can prove that social science is necessary from any point of view, then of course you have a rational value judgment. So you must leave it at saying that social science is valuable only under certain conditions, if you make certain premises which it is not necessary to make. All right, but what does this mean, that the so-called ultimate values can be questioned, which in this form is perfectly correct because everything, every assertion, can be questioned? But are there not standards inherent in a given pursuit, [as in] the case of the blundering general, as by being a general he subjects himself to that standard? By being a physician, the physician is as such subject to the standard that what he does promotes human health. No physician as physician is under the obligation to meet the issue[49] [of whether] health [is] a good. Medicine as medicine presupposes that health is a good, although one could perhaps say[50] [of] a physician who is sure that health is not a good: I wouldn't go to that physician.

But now let us go beyond that. Social science, as distinguished from medicine, I would say also has such a standard inherent in what it is doing. Let us call this very provisionally and very vaguely "social health." Now don't jump at me. Every child knows, every child who reads the newspaper knows that social health is an infinitely more controversial subject than the health of the body. Social cancers are not as easily diagnosed and as unambiguously diagnosed as cancers of the body. But this is not true without limits. In spite of all controversy, you still find some points where people agree precisely because they utterly disagree regarding policies, [even] the most urgent and most important policies, for example: "Resist Soviet Russia" or "Better Red than dead."[xxix] A very powerful antagonism, yet there is some agreement somewhere, an important agreement which is not practically important, because it is practically taken for granted, but which is theoretically important, [such as] in the discussions as we have now.

So to repeat, now I would like to make perhaps another point which I want to bring up later. If you look at the examples which are given in the literature by the people who really try to present it and not present it as a thing which is self-evident, what would they say? I have here a statement of facts: A is B. And then: Do A, imperative, and no imperative-like statement follows. That is of course not true, because if the statement A is good, every sensible man (I mean, if this is all that can be said about A, that A is good) will draw the conclusion "I will try to get the good," that is naturally much too simple a statement because there are many conflicting good things and you have to enlarge the issue. But the merely logical consideration, that imperatives differ from simple statements of fact, is in no way sufficient. We have to go into substantive considerations.

Now when people do go into that, which happens very rarely, then you will find all sorts of arguments—in Max Weber especially, who did take the trouble. I [have] said occasionally about Weber's argument [something] like this. Weber raises this question: German culture or French culture, which is higher? Can this be decided by a professor, i.e., theoretically? No, of course not, but not because he is a professor but because the

[xxix] Characteristic slogans during the Cold War to champion resistance or capitulation to the perceived Soviet threat.

question is so ill-defined that no one, professor or no professor, can decide. Not all so-called value questions are reasonable questions, just as not all factual questions are reasonable questions. If you take another issue which concerns Weber very much, two forms of high religion, say, Christianity and Buddhism; and Weber said: How can a professor, poor fellow, have the nerve to say Christianity is higher than Buddhism or Buddhism is higher than Christianity? I would say that commonsensically Weber is sound—commonsensically, and not going into deeper issues. But what does this mean, again if you keep to the rational argument? It may very well be, and I am sure that it is, that there are human phenomena of such a greatness, so high that the peaks are invisible through clouds—in other words, that it is not possible practically, speaking on theoretical grounds, to solve them. But does this mean that we cannot say and see that a mountain is higher than a molehill, if I cannot see which of two mountains of such height is higher than the other?

Now let me come to a conclusion of this particular point. I would say—and this is again one of the things which cannot be settled on the basis of one little piece of argument, but one has to take a broad view of the situation—because it is impossible to understand without evaluating, the so-called value-free social science rests in all cases on concealed value judgments of a crude form. The use by social scientists of psychopathology, such terms as "adjustment" and "neurotic" and so on, they are of course value judgments. I don't care that these people assert they are not value judgments; they will be understood by every man as value judgments. And I would say the only thing I have against this notion of adjustment is that it is a very uncritical notion, because the question arises, of course: Adjusted to what? If someone is ill-adjusted to the gutter, that is a compliment. It is much too narrow. Take another example.[51] Weber made a great use in sociology—and that affected political science in various ways—of the distinction between charismatic, traditional, and rational as purely descriptive, analytic concepts, implying no value judgments. But one has only to dig a bit deeper and try to understand what Weber meant by that, [and] one sees the value judgments: Weber's concern with the freedom of the individual in contradistinction to traditions on the one hand, and the terrific bureaucracies of modern times, the rational,[52] [on the other]. This led him to have this concern with what he called [the] charismatic, which is neither traditional nor rational. And without this concern with the individual, without this evaluation in favor of the individual, Weber's books would be as dull as quite a few articles in a sociological review. By the way, there is another form in which this same thing which Weber meant is now rampant, [the distinction], allegedly also purely descriptive, [between] the self-directed, the other-directed, and the tradition-directed.[xxx] You cannot hear that—well, you can hear the isolated sentence, but you cannot enter into that or understand it if you don't see that these people mean the true human being is of course the self-directed human being. And these are various defective forms of human beings, to be tradition-directed or other-directed.

A last point. Someone could say, and someone close to Weber might say (*he* would say, of course) that the concepts are based on evaluation. What does it mean in the practice of research that the questions are raised from a specific point of view? All questions are

[xxx] See David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Raoul Denny, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

raised from a certain point of view, from a certain interest, i.e., on the basis of very definite value judgments. But what is true of the question is not true of the answers. The questions are, for the reason given, subjective. The answers given are objective because their truth or untruth is determined by the rules of evidence, logic, methodology, or whatever you might call it. But the point is that the answers, that the sciences as a whole, consist necessarily of the questions, of the framework, of the concept, of the intellectual tools or the conceptual tools, or however you call it, as much as of the mere facts. As a matter of fact, the facts are always decisively affected by the way in which you approach them, by the concepts in the light of which you organize them. If the concepts are subjective because of the fact that they are necessarily based on values, on evaluation, and not merely by reference to values, the whole science is subjective, and that would indeed be the end of the science in the traditional sense. And that is the conclusion which is drawn by quite a few contemporaries of which I will speak next time. I think I must stop here, but I am perfectly willing for about five or ten minutes, and even glad to argue the things out to the extent—

Student: The thing that bothers me—you say that in the subject matter there is an inherent standard, but I think the thing men like Simmel and Weber were trying to get around was the parochialism, the particularism inherent in the standard, and the personal element there. I don't see how you can judge such things as culture. I think they wanted to get away from the standard set up before they investigated the subject matter . . . find the standard in the process of investigating culture. I think you have a much better chance of evaluating Japanese versus American culture after you have studied them, rather than to have values at the beginning of your study. That is something akin to prejudice which I think they were trying to get away from.

LS: I believe you are right that this was their motive. I think one must make a great distinction between Weber and Simmel. Simmel was technically a philosopher, Weber was not. And I don't believe that so-called technical philosophers are as such better thinkers than economists, as Weber was originally, but it so happened that Simmel really had a very good mind. Now Simmel wrote his book which I referred to[xxxi] when he was relatively young, thirty-eight, and we would have to go into the subject, into which I cannot possibly go partly from my own ignorance, of what Simmel did when he was about seventy. Did he not perhaps come to see that something was inadequate in this early book? Parochialism surely is a great intellectual vice. It may be a social virtue under given conditions, but it is in itself an intellectual vice, there is no question. And one way of avoiding it is of course traveling, for example, to Japan. Now some people get easily seasick or airsick and can't *travel*, and therefore the human race in its wisdom has discovered a means of traveling without leaving one's village, and that is called reading, for example, about olden times, about old times or other countries. One can do that. But here [is] what happens. You try then—say, a social scientist—to go to Japan and study Japan. And if they have entirely different notions—we have what they[53] [call] a guilt culture, and they have a shame culture,[xxxii] is that not what they say? You learn that, that you [can] look at moral things without ever using such terms as a law or as guilt, and can

[xxxi] See session 3. The book is *Einleitung in die Moral Wissenschaft* (1892-1893).
[xxxii] See Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946).

only think in terms of honor and shame. Entirely different orientations. Well, I would say you don't have to travel so far: if you read Homer and Aristotle, you get it nearer home.[xxxiii] But that is not the point, because I am sure there are things in Japan which you cannot learn from the Greeks either. But how do you proceed?[54] [Perhaps] you are simply an open-minded human being without a so-called categorical framework in your head; then you are a blessed man, and I am sure you will learn very interesting things. But the social scientist goes with a categorical framework. They say he has to. You know what I mean by that? For example, he knows there is such a thing as culture. Don't underestimate these innocent looking things.

Let me give another example. We make a distinction between law and customs and ritual, I don't know what. Different things. There are "cultures" in which the distinction is inapplicable. By applying the distinction, you distort that culture. Let us generalize from that. Our scientific, sociological frame of reference, perfectly value-neutral as it claims to be, is fundamentally based on the experience of Western man, and that I call a terrible parochialism. It is much worse than that of the cowboy in Texas who goes to Japan and comes back and says Texas steers are the best and that is all there is to it, because that is an innocent parochialism and everyone goes through it. But that of the social scientist who goes with his categories to Ghana, or whatever it may be, [and] comes back with the same categories, that is the true and terrible parochialism. And I would contend that no one was more parochial than Max Weber. I don't compare him with the Texas cowboy, but I am speaking now of social scientists. I think some things can be shown in a few sentences, [for example], that the basic distinction between traditional, rational, and charismatic is a most atrociously parochial distinction. I cannot repeat that now. But let me follow the broader outline. What would follow from what you say? Every such thing now called culture (let us speak a little more cautiously of independent societies) is unique, has a different character, and that applies also to its concepts. In order to interpret Japanese culture, you have to make a distinction as the Japanese make it and not the so-called hypothetical and purely provisional distinctions which the social scientist makes, and of which he claims [that] they are purely hypothetical and provisional but they remain unaltered in the process in all cases I know. Do you see what I mean? I am in favor of an infinitely more critical posture than Max Weber had. I would hesitate to apply these terrible terms to Japanese [culture]. I would wait, I would study [Japanese for] ten years[55] and live there, and then would begin to see what the conceptual framework inherent in Japanese society is.

Student: Well, isn't this an ideal situation where a man will suspend his judgment that long? Is it really possible . . . or are there always impressions about the conceptual framework of their society . . .

LS: Well, all right, if there is somebody sent over by the American government—let us not take Japan, which is our ally, but say to Czechoslovakia—to spy for this country, then of course why should he take the trouble? He has to be useful to the United States and try to get the most important information as fast as possible and then to come back with it. That is clear. But if we are theoretical, if we are interested in knowledge for its own sake,

---

[xxxiii] See also E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951).

and then for some more complicated reason in social science for our own sake, we must dedicate ourselves. Look, that is not such a fantastic thing. Did you ever hear of people called classical scholars who do nothing in their lives apart from reading papers and so on, than reading Greek or Roman or Latin classics? Why should not a man dedicate himself to the Japanese, to the Hindu culture? As a matter of fact, there are such people even on this campus. If you would go over the catalog you would find Professor Bobrinskoy[xxxiv] is a Professor of Sanskrit Studies. I mean, the difference between the social scientist who does Japan in one year and the man who makes a lifelong study is only the difference between a superficial and a thorough man, other things being equal. Your demand, properly generalized, would condemn the social scientist to fundamental superficiality. I make all allowances for the weakness of the human flesh, but one must not make these allowances in one's overall plan for a science, which after all needs the work of many, many generations. And what cannot be done in one lifetime could be done in many.

I would say this is the truly interesting problem, the so-called categorical framework or whatever expression is now in vogue. You must have heard that expression, that every science has ultimately a system of concepts, a system of concepts in the light of which it assembles facts, selects them, orders them, organizes them. But in the social sciences it is surely true that our conceptual framework[56] is of Western origin primarily, in spite of the use of such things as "taboo," which are not of Western origin. But the overall trend, that there is such a thing as economics, and here economics, there law, there religion, there art, there science, that is surely [a] Western tradition which may have its parallels elsewhere, but we cannot answer that. And the only truly scientific procedure would be in a given case to understand the inherent framework. And that is a very interesting problem, because if you take the case of a very simple people, preliterate or however you call it now, they may not know it, and if you ask them improperly, too early, prematurely, you may distort their answers and get a wrong orientation. A student of Chinese, a Western student of Chinese once told me this story, [of] which I speak from memory, so it may be a bit distorted. The ancient Chinese travelers, a thousand, fifteen hundred years ago, when they came to another nation, to what they called a barbarian nation (there must be a Chinese term for that), the first question which they addressed to these people was: How do you bow to your king? I think these travelers were very wise men. You only have to generalize properly. After all, we cannot take the Chinese travelers simply as our authority. Properly generalized, it would mean this: What do you regard as the highest? That is of course implied: the king is the highest man, how do you bow to him? But first of all, what is the highest? That is the question: What do you regard as the highest? If you understand that, you have understood the culture.

There was, so far as I know, only one Western thinker who made this explicitly the theme of social science, of his equivalent of social science. This man was not, I am sorry to say, technically a social scientist, he was only a philosopher. His name was Hegel. That is the simple basis of Hegel's so-called philosophy of history: that in order to understand a culture, you must find out—I mean, he didn't use the word culture, what we would call a

[xxxiv] George V. Bobrinskoy (1901-1985), chairman of the linguistics department at the University of Chicago from 1951 until 1966.

culture—you must find out what the culture regards as the highest, as the overarching, and how [the culture][57] understands it. When the Chinese speak of heaven or whatever they do, they may mean something very different from what we, or maybe the Bible or the Greeks understood by it. That has to be found out. I would say the relativistic social science is so radically parochial because it is free from the simplistic and naïve parochialism of the ordinary traveler. Nothing is required for that. A college education ordinarily takes care of that, but the deeper one is the parochialism here in the concepts, and social science does not take care of that in any way, as far as I can see. That would be my answer to that. So if you think the premise of my argument is some parochial addiction which simplifies matters greatly—of course, because my tradition solves the problems for me and I can sleep the rest of my days—I believe you are mistaken. I think I can say that I begin to think where Weber stopped[58] think[ing] . . . Logical positivists don't even see these things because they don't see a problem at all and don't know where the problem starts.

Student: You really supported my original contention . . .

LS: Namely?

Same student: What was at the foundation of the fact–value distinction was the fact that they were worried about the problem of parochialism. And your theory, which says that there is in each subject some inherent standard, would imply that there is some universal standard . . .

LS: Not necessarily, because it could be that an army means something very different in Japan, in old Japan, than it means in the European Middle Ages. We would have to go into that. But Weber was not speaking of some far-fetched general, say, in the Chinese Middle Ages; he was speaking of the general as we ordinarily are concerned in our immediate environment: generals defined in professional terms, where no other consideration comes in. May I say, in order to help a bit, this view which you sketch, which is implied but I believe only implied, [when] thought through leads to the consequence that there cannot be a social science in the sense of a universal science. The most you can have is a Western social science, and for other cultures perhaps also a social science in their sense. That is something one would have to consider. I call this historicism. That is not positivism. But the consistent historicist who has thought it through would of course not make use of the fact–value distinction. They would simply say: We accept the values of our society as the values of our society, not more, but we have to do that in order to make any sense. Can you repeat the point where you find the—no, I think I did not in any way do anything illegitimate there, because Weber, the example discussed by Max Weber is wholly innocent of any consideration of Western, Chinese, Aztec, or other different notions of the general. It is wholly innocent of that.

Student: You say that in order to understand . . . problems, you have to evaluate it. To evaluate you have to have certain values. How do you get this? . . . If there is such a thing that can be agreed upon, this is fine, but I don't think[59] [there] can be. I think there are different considerations in different cultures of what makes a thing valuable.

LS: But I must simply say this, that this consideration of so-called cultural variety, there is no . . . in Max Weber. It exists as a key consideration of Max Weber . . . that goes without saying . . . the *Sociology of Religion*[xxxv] . . . that is very different . . . But in the fundamental methodological considerations it doesn't play any role where he attempts to prove the necessity of the fact–value distinction; the consideration of historical variety or cultural variety doesn't enter. But you could say: Why should we limit ourselves arbitrarily to the argument of Max Weber; let us put the question on a broader basis. And I must consider that. But I say that this is not the characteristic of positivism but a certain alternative which exists today and which I call historicism. Of course they frequently merge. By the way, the mere fact of cultural or social variety is of no theoretical importance whatever, because that was always known. Cultural variety shows that you cannot simply identify yourself . . . with the so-called values of your society . . . The mere fact of cultural variety is in itself irrelevant, and only by [a] very complicated and never truly written intellectual history of that last four hundred years did history, or culture if you like that better, become theoretically important. This is the last question.

Student: Doesn't this . . . understanding a book or a culture on its own terms assume that one must exclude value judgments in approaching the material, one's own value judgments in particular, and [instead] taking just the terms used in the book or in the culture, and taking them as they understood themselves?

LS: . . . Can people like me—because there may be people in the class who . . . Can they claim to have given sufficient consideration to all relevant considerations? I mean, I know nothing of Sanskrit or Chinese. If it would become necessary for me to become a student of Sanskrit culture or Chinese culture, I would have to wait a very long time before I would dare to make any judgments because it would take such a long time to understand. I know a bit of so-called Greek, and if I think I know somewhat . . . I can promise you . . . other value judgments that Plato was greater than . . . these old people who said he was the greatest among the Greeks . . . I think that is a sensible judgment. But since this covers such a large ground, a very long time would be needed. But that I could claim to have understood Plato, fully, adequately . . . Now this is a relatively simple language, Greek, compared with Sanskrit. How could I get it? It would take an infinitely long time. This really belongs to a later part of my argument. There is some kind of judgment which goes on all the time: it must. I read something, say, in Plato. [I might say:] I don't understand that, it seems absurd. Value judgment. But I have a certain experience of Plato and I know he doesn't simply make an absurd statement, so I repeat, and I may succeed in understanding what this seeming absurdity truly meant. But these acts of understanding are all accompanied by value judgments, whether made explicitly or not. This is not a final judgment. So when I confront a very strange man with very strange ideas of what was good and bad—I have read an English translation of a book by

---

[xxxv] Strauss seems to refer to Weber's *Sociology of Religion*. See *Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), which is a translation of a part of his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]), 1922). An English translation of the whole of the larger work is available in *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

a Chinese mystic which is . . . simply shocking. But I must also say there were certain other things in it which I found very profound, so I don't judge. I simply say: Well, if I could, I would study. But I don't see where the difficulty arises. Let us proceed in an orderly manner. We will try to finish positivism next time and then turn to historicism.

---

[1] Deleted "of."
[2] Deleted "do."
[3] Deleted "in."
[4] Deleted "its."
[5] Deleted "that."
[6] Deleted "the correction of."
[7] Deleted "where."
[8] Deleted "call."
[9] Deleted "things."
[10] Moved "we."
[11] Deleted "in the age."
[12] Deleted "do."
[13] Deleted "of."
[14] Deleted "superior."
[15] Deleted "superior."
[16] Deleted "how shall I say."
[17] Deleted "made."
[18] Deleted "for."
[19] Deleted "and."
[20] Deleted "in."
[21] Deleted "this."
[22] Deleted "that is."
[23] Deleted "it."
[24] Deleted "common good."
[25] Deleted "the."
[26] Deleted "who."
[27] Moved "not."
[28] Deleted "they."
[29] Deleted "that.
[30] Deleted "and."
[31] Deleted "that."
[32] Deleted "a."
[33] Deleted "thing."
[34] Deleted "the."
[35] Moved "sociologists."
[36] Deleted "it."
[37] Deleted "I mean."
[38] Deleted "had."
[39] Deleted "there."
[40] Deleted "ones."
[41] Deleted "now."
[42] Deleted "what."
[43] Deleted "that."
[44] Deleted "let me say."
[45] Deleted "it."
[46] Deleted "of."
[47] Deleted "on."
[48] Moved "that."
[49] Moved "is."
[50] Deleted "that."

[51] Deleted “for example.”
[52] Deleted “what do you call it”
[53] Deleted “say”
[54] Deleted “either.”
[55] Moved “Japanese.”
[56] Deleted “which we have.”
[57] Deleted “it.”
[58] Deleted “to.”
[59] Deleted “they.”

Session 5: October 16, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: I had hoped to finish my introduction by the end of the last meeting, but owing to the extended discussions I have to devote at least this week and possibly even a lecture next week to the introduction. I remind you only of its purpose. We plan to find a way toward classical political philosophy for whatever reason, but we cannot do this properly, methodically, if we do not know in advance what the peculiar obstacles are which prevent us to begin with from understanding classical political philosophy as it was meant [to be understood]. Now these obstacles are our assumptions, our convictions, our prejudices, however we call them, certain premises of which it is not certain in every case that they have been examined by us. But we must at least identify them and, to the extent to which it is possible in such a meeting, examine them. Now last time I began a critical discussion of positivism, of positivism as far as it affects especially political science. And at the end of the last meeting a student said that I had misunderstood the whole fact–value distinction because the motive was the experience of "cultural variety" and the desire of a freedom from parochialism. I denied that, and on the following grounds: because I made a distinction between positivism and historicism, and I am not now speaking of historicism. Let me clarify this point a bit.

The positivistic view asserts that the only genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge, and the model of scientific knowledge is supplied by the natural sciences. For positivism, for the positivistic fact–value distinction, the support is not cultural variety as such, and that, I would say, for a very good reason. The student of mathematics or of physics, for example, becomes acquainted with the fact that there is such a thing as Chinese mathematics, Babylonian mathematics, Greek mathematics. That does not for one moment make him doubtful of modern mathematics as the highest form of mathematics, so that mere cultural variety is no argument at all. The support for the fact–value distinction as used by the positivists is an analysis of knowledge on the one hand and what was formerly called will on the other, or as we might say in this case, the distinction between cognition and desire. Values are the things desired or the principles of possible desires, and a desire cannot be criticized according to this view except in terms of another desire, not on the basis of any fact as fact. And this is the crucial point:[1] there is no factual or objective difference regarding rank between desires. If someone has what we would ordinarily call a very low desire and another man has what we would ordinarily call a high desire, the positivist tells us that this distinction is only based on our peculiar desire which is as defensible, or as indefensible as any other desire.

But still I do not like to create the impression[2] [that I am] evading an issue on formalistic grounds, namely, the seemingly formalistic ground [of] the cultural variety issue which belongs to the discussion of historicism and not of positivism. Since it has been brought up and has to be discussed anyway, I would like to say a few words about that. Now in

[i] See Strauss, "An Epilogue," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968, 1995), 203-23. Originally published in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962), 305-27.

the first place,[3] values are said to differ from culture to culture; that is cultural variety. Is this unqualifiedly true? In order to guarantee relevance to this observation of cultural variety, we would first have to know that we must treat all cultures as equal in rank, regardless of whether these are very primitive or preliterate cultures, or high cultures. For example, what about the values of Confucian China, and that of a primitive tribe in the Amazon region of South America? Do these two cultures really have the same claim to our moral respect? I would like to mention here an experience[4] [I once had]. I, who know nothing of Chinese things, gave once a description of the gentleman, of a perfect gentleman in the sense of Aristotle. And there is a Greek word[ii] which does not of course literally mean the perfect gentleman, it means a noble and good man, or the beautiful and good man, but it is ordinarily translated into English quite plausibly by "perfect gentlemen," and I developed that. There was a student there who knew absolutely nothing of things Greek but was a student of things Chinese, and he said that is exactly what the Chinese old traditional sense meant. So perhaps the things are not so different, if you come down to the central points as they seem to be.

Now the second point I would like to make is this: values are[5] according to this view supposed to belong to a culture. If this is true, the Western values belong to Western culture, and it would seem to follow that we ought to judge Western things—policies, institutions, what have you—on the basis of Western values. The whole fact–value distinction would not arise, whereas the position which I am discussing now is that which as a matter of principle prohibits all value judgments. From the point of view of positivism it is of no importance whatever in a theoretical context whether certain values to which a social scientist refers or defers are the values of his society, because as a positivist might very well say: There are all kinds of conflicting values within one and the same society, [and] even within the same individual at different times.

Now I come to the most interesting point which was raised, namely, the openness to other cultures; and this is in itself of course something which is a virtue, as I would say. But there is a certain ambiguity here. What does this openness mean? In the first place, it would mean tolerance, toleration, in two ways. In the first place, one remains certain that one's own faith is the best simply, as religious tolerance was understood in the seventeenth century. But of course one does not draw the conclusion that you may persecute other faiths. In other words, respect for other cultures but without for one moment becoming doubtful that the Western values are the highest. This, I believe, is not quite [what is] meant when people speak today of openness toward other cultures. They mean by it rather a shift of emphasis from the substantive faith, from the substantive Western faith to something like peace, or to something in which all faiths agree. You see, tolerance can mean [that] the most important thing is my religious conviction, but practically it is very important to be tolerant—practically important, but surely not the highest thing. There can also be a shift of emphasis from the substantive conviction to tolerance as the highest value, which is an entirely different thing. In other words, that from this point on there will of necessity be—which is not sufficiently considered by everyone: the intolerance to the heterodox or to the heretic will cease, but now there will be intolerance only to the intolerant, because absolute tolerance is impossible. The classic

[ii] *Kaloskagathos*.

formulation of this you find in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, in the chapter on civil religion.[iii] In other words, to repeat that point in this way: tolerance becomes in fact the highest value, and the substantive faith becomes . . . if I may use a term from political history.

But there is something else apart from tolerance in either form, and that could very well be [a] fusion of two different cultures: the Western becoming acquainted with the Eastern or, vice versa, learns from the other culture. And if we think this through to its end, there would be an end to cultural variety proper. There would be a single world culture which is the synthesis of all particular cultures on a new plane. A third thing which we should mention nevertheless if we want to be truly open-minded: we must also permit the possibility that in this open-minded meeting of, say, Western with Eastern cultures or values [that] the Western values might prove to be superior to the others. I mean, I don't say they are, but if I am truly open-minded I cannot exclude this *a priori*.

Now the other point which I believe is also frequently neglected in this discussion is this. This is the simple proverbial wisdom: What is good for the goose is good for the gander. In other words, if parochialism, i.e., uncritical absolutization of one's own values, is bad for the West, it must also be bad for the members of other cultures. Or is this not a demand of simple fairness? Then if this is the case, then non-parochialism means transcending all cultures as cultures. This is not a novelty; this is the old story. It was called by the Greeks transcending all *nomoi*, all laws or conventions as such. And the positive premise of this negative thing is the view that the good life is a life of questioning and examining, typically represented by the figure of Socrates; and one could raise a question whether this dedication to the life of question and examination—of course examining one's own heritage as well—is not, if we cut out all the frills, the substance of what is meant by Western culture. After all, what we now call science is only a very special form—in many respects [an] impoverished form, in other respects of course [an] expanded [one]—of what Socrates meant by the view that the good life is the life of questioning and examining. Surely—and again, here I agree with our open-minded friends—this Socratic assertion, namely, that the good life is the life of questioning and examining, which is at the basis of every demand for non-parochialism, is itself in need of justification. Surely, maybe Socrates was wrong, and that is surely important, and I will have to say something about this later. But I would also say [that] in order to see this—namely, to see that Socrates was fundamentally wrong—it is not necessary to leave the West. After all, there is a Western tradition which is, as far as the principle goes, anti-Socratic, namely, the biblical tradition. And so we have in our Western tradition a certain built-in guarantee against the simple dogmatic acceptance of the Greek heritage.

A last point. I hope I have conveyed to you—I hope, I cannot be sure—that I am as anxious to understand other cultures, as I now call them, as anyone else. I am prevented from engaging in that because I have certain other preoccupations, but I use every opportunity to . . . One thing I would say in conclusion. Genuine understanding of foreign cultures, [being] concerned with such understanding without any condescension, presupposes an awareness of the limitations of our culture. Otherwise it is a very

[iii] Book 4, chapter 8.

superficial thing, a superficial politeness or however you call it, vanity. But it is a serious matter if we know we have something to learn, something of importance to learn, not merely regarding pottery and folkdances and such. Now [being aware of the limitations of our culture] in turn requires[6] a deep understanding of our own heritage at its best. It is extremely easy to see the terrible shortcomings of the West as it is now, but that is not Western culture in every respect at its best. And in this respect of course classical philosophy is of special importance, the understanding of it, to have a proper estimate of what the West surely means. You may have noticed that I could not help in stating this issue[7] [to use] value judgments. I believe no human problem of any importance can be stated, even as a question, without the use of value judgments. That was the point. But now let me return to my argument regarding positivism, and I would be very glad if I could finish it today and at the same time we have a discussion of the whole issue.

Now the points which I tried to make last time were these. [First], that the fact–value distinction as ordinarily understood leads in itself to nihilism. The practical consequence is not necessarily nihilism because people are, fortunately, inconsistent. But that is what would follow if taken seriously. The second point[8] I made is this: Is it possible to speak of social matters in a broad sense, not some selected for the purpose of proving the possibility, say, of more counting or computing—is it possible to conceive of social science as a whole as perfectly free from value judgments? And I denied that. One point which I made which I think I should repeat is: the apparent avoidance of value judgments doesn't settle the issue, because you may have to consider the hidden value judgments, hidden in the conceptual framework which you use. To remind you of a popular example, when you use the psychological or sociological distinction between self-directed, tradition-directed, and other-directed,[iv] you have the value judgment there. Whether each user of it is aware of it is of course of no importance, it is in fact there and it shows[9] [itself] sooner or later in expected or in unexpected places.

Now I would like to take up an issue which is akin to it but somewhat broader. Is it true that the new political science, which accepts the fact–value distinction as essential,[10] has led to a better understanding of political things than the old political science, which was evaluative? Has it opened our eyes to political phenomena which were overlooked by the old evaluating political science? Generally speaking, I would say the effect of this approach is that the political things are reduced to sociological or psychological elements. I would mention only one point. It is impossible to speak about political things on their own terms without referring sooner or later to something called the common good, or the public welfare, or whatever you call it. Now this necessarily[11] acts as value judgment. If you speak of a given interest as sectional or individual and another as public, you have in fact made a value judgment. It follows therefore immediately, and therefore the political as the public, as the common, must be reduced in one way or the other to the subpolitical, which is either the sociological or the psychological. One could say [that] to the extent to which there was a discovery of things which escaped the old political science, to the extent to which there was one, that discovery is balanced by a forgetting of the things which were always in the foreground of the old political science. Therefore the question

[iv] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Reuel Denny, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

arises, assuming there has been something new discovered: Which of the two, the newly discovered or the forgotten, is more important?

Now I will try to mention some examples. In the old political science—by which I would understand ultimately Aristotle, but by which in the ordinary discussions I understand [as] the political science around 1900—around 1900 there was what is now called the orthodox democratic theory. This orthodox democratic theory is said to have neglected the importance of the party system. You know when you think of such classics of modern democratic theory like Rousseau's *Social Contract*, for example, parties are always treated as a cancer—as factions, they were called. Now what does this mean, however, that the old theory neglected that? Is the importance of the party system in up-to-date democracies a discovery of political science? Of course not. Every politician, every citizen, has become aware of the party system and of its importance for the working of democracy without the benefit of any political science. What then is the particular contribution of political science? Is it the discovery of the beneficent effects of the party system? Is it, in other words, a rational vindication of the party system over [and] against the traditional disparagement of the party system? Well, that is also not quite true. For example, that has a long prehistory. To mention only two authors of the utmost importance, the first [of whom] is Machiavelli. In his *Discourses* he tries to show how discord, factions, is good for freedom, by the example of Rome. That is the principle.[12] But in a way more important [is] Burke, Edmund Burke, in *Present Discontents*[v] and other places, [who] gave the most fundamental vindication of the party system. But that is not the full story. If we truly want to be open-minded, we have to wonder whether the traditional disparagement of the party system was so entirely stupid. Now that is a point of some importance, and one of, [or] perhaps the greatest political practitioner of our century, Winston Churchill, has given a very remarkable discussion of that in his *Marlborough*.[vi] Unfortunately I don't have the volume and page number here. You know Churchill is[13] living proof that the party system is not the perfection of politics, because of his famous . . . he committed to the two parties in his life. Now in his *Marlborough*[14] when he speaks of the incipient party system in the time of Queen Anne, he discusses [the matter] on the basis of his long experience on both sides of the fence and his very profound historical knowledge and deep thinking, and comes out with the solution that this is is not yet settled, whether the party system as we know it (which is today of course indispensable) is truly in every respect good. And the experience of national happiness in England, and to some extent in this country in particular crisis situations, is an indication of that.

But it seems to me that the real understanding of this issue has not even begun, because the positivistic political science limits itself to an analysis of facts and correlation of facts without entering into the deeper stratum, and to go into that deeper stratum means to go into that stratum where you cannot say a word without making value judgments. What is the premise of the party system? The party system, in contradistinction to any factions in the traditional sense, presupposes that decent men can disagree on political principles. That is more than implied in what Burke said, because it is clear: if you had one party, the

---

[v] Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (London, 1770).
[vi] Winston Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, 6 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1933).

scum of the population, and the other, the nice people, that would not be a vindication of the party system as party system, it would only be a concession to the scum that they are too powerful to [prevent][vii] them from finding political expression. But we mean something more when we say [that] the party system is vindicated. A simple justification of that kind existed in the early nineteenth century when you had, in Europe at any rate, the bipartition [of] the liberals and the conservatives. That was based on a broader view [that] the secret of social goodness is order and progress. And this duality, order and progress, finds its natural expression in a group of people who are more inclined to order, and the others are more inclined to progress, and the peaceful tug-of-war between them is exactly the prescription by a wise political doctor for political society. But let me turn to a somewhat deeper stratum. The vindication of the party system presupposes that there must be tolerance regarding political principles. In other words, there is a variety of conflicting political principles, each of which is as respectable as the other. Now if you state it in this form, you see immediately, I think, how the true matrix of the party system is the experience of religious tolerance, because religious tolerance as it came out gradually in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant exactly this: that decent men can disagree regarding religion and yet live together in the same society. This training in tolerance regarding religious principles was the seminary, we could say, for a training in tolerance regarding political tolerance. I only wish to indicate the general lines of a genuine analysis of the basis of the party system, and I hope I have shown it is impossible to state the problem without using value judgments.

Now what are then the characteristics of this new social science, this radically positivistic, value-free social science? Let me make one general remark, which I cannot possibly substantiate now, but I throw it out as a question. I once asserted in a seminar here in this building, where one very famous representative of a new political science was present—a very dear colleague of mine, by the way. I put the question to him: Can you give me a single example of a discovery made by the new political science which could not have been made by any man sufficiently informed or using ordinary common sense? And I can only say he gave two examples, which both were what I would consider rather petty things, but they might be genuine. I believe one could show by analysis that the discovery there was decisively due to the fact that the political scientist in question happened to have common sense. What he found out later on by statistical or other data was only a secondary confirmation, very uninteresting compared with the first suspicion that a certain commonly-held view in this country might have become wrong because of the change of circumstances. The issue in one case was whether one could station Negro soldiers in the South, and that proved to be possible in the Second World War, and[15] a social scientist had studied that [issue], according to this report. But, as I say, the decisive step was that he thought maybe 1940 is no longer 1870. One must go into that, and I don't want to make the impression of being glib about those matters—they are much too important for that—but I would say it simply to give you a warning not to accept[16] claims without distinguishing what in a given analysis is sound, and if it is sound, whether its soundness has anything to do with the use of these new methods or with simply ordinary intelligent political observation. They are obviously two very different things.

[vii] The word in brackets is in the original transcript, proposed by the transcriber.

Now the characteristics of the new social science and political science seem to be these: [First], general reductionism, the reduction of something to something else, so that the thing reduced is no longer recognizable. This is done in two different ways.[17] [An] example[18] will make it clear. In the first place, the reduction of the political to the generally social. What do I mean by that? Political society surely is a society. You can even use a vaguer term and say "a group." Therefore a political society must necessarily comply with whatever is true of any group—group of humans I believe is understood—otherwise you would come into group theory in mathematics, which would make it still more difficult. So let us assume a group of humans. Now these groups have two manifest characteristics, [as of] any group: they cohere and they change. So a genuine theory of groups would tell you how many modes of cohesion there are and how many modes of change there are, and furthermore, how many modes of the interaction of those two. You can, I am sure, develop this very nicely. Now the result of course is that you don't recognize anything any more which has anything to do with political society, and more particularly with the individual political society with which you are concerned. I call this the formalism of the new social science. I believe the most famous representative of this science is Talcott Parsons.[viii] I don't know whether any one of you has read anything of him. I believe you will see that if you don't retranslate the statements into ordinary language you will have very, very great difficulties in understanding him at all.

Now the first point was the reduction of the political to the generally social, and culminating in formalism. The second [characteristic] is the reduction of the political to the subpolitical as such—because group as group cannot be called subpolitical, it is too formal, too abstract for that—and ultimately of course to the subhuman, because[19] the same reasoning which leads you from political society to sociology and psychology leads you from human psychology or human sociology to animal sociology and animal psychology. Do you see why that is the same reasoning? Because always you try to understand the complex in terms of the more simple. Now according to a very common view, a so-called small group, a face-to-face society is much simpler than a political society. The face-to-face association will therefore be the key to the larger society. But face-to-face societies consisting of human beings with very different "personalities" are of course something infinitely complex compared with a litter of young rats. That is said, that the decision which a rat has to make is much simpler than the decisions which humans have to make; and therefore it may be ridiculous, but if it is ridiculous it is surely methodic, and that is something.

Now this reduction of the political to the subpolitical I would say leads not to formalism but to what I call, in a strict sense, vulgarianism. It means in each case to understand the higher in terms of the lower. I remind you of an example which I mentioned last time: culture. "Culture" was once a term of very high meaning: a cultured human being, a cultivated mind. Today, when it is perfectly legitimate to speak of the culture of suburbia, of the gang of juvenile delinquents, and so on and so on,[20] this term has lost all value, all respectability. The same would be true of such terms as "personality" and "charismatic" and all the other terms which you hear. I believe that is not an accident, this bifurcation

[viii] Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), American sociologist, author of *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: The Free Press, 1949).

into formalism on the one hand and vulgarianism on the other; I believe this has very much to do with the fundamental character of modern science. That it appears in these particular forms is of course true only in the social sciences in this clearly discernible manner. Now this reductionism, in these two forms of formalism and vulgarianism, is the first consequence.

The second consequence which I would like to mention is parochialism. I take up your theme, perhaps from some additional points of view. Now how does this show, this parochialism? It is clear that modern positivistic social science or political science wishes to be universal. I mean, they don't want to find out merely laws or regularities regarding political behavior in the United States around 1961. The ultimate goal of this social science is universal laws, say, of social change or anything equally broad. But this wishes to be objective to the highest degree. Objectivity is guaranteed by very specific methods of research never used, at least never used on such a scale before. If you take such a conscientious and intelligent man like Thucydides, writing the history of the Peloponnesian War, what researches could he make?[21] In various Greek towns and villages [he asked] people who seemed reasonably trustworthy: How many Spartans had gone through the city five years ago? And they gave him rough figures, and you know what these are worth, and it is amazing how reliable the *History* is on the whole. We would be shocked by this lack of exactness. We have exact methods. Very well. But these methods of research, at least the most important ones for the social sciences, are applicable only to people living now in countries where such kind of research is permitted. Think of interviews and questionnaires. I mean, if you would start to do that on mainland China or in Czechoslovakia, I believe you would suffer worse than if you were trying to photograph an old hut. As I put it, neither those in their graves nor those behind the curtains can be interviewed or be sent questionnaires. The consequence is that the data which we have all stem from countries in which you have more or less something like modern democracy. The data are all "democratic" data.

Let me make a jump. The behavior which we study, and which claims to be a study of man and of human affairs, is in fact a study of modern democratic man. I call this "parochialism." Well, I give you another example which may be dismissed as a paradox, but I believe it is still interesting. A few years ago there was an article in the *American Political Science Review* by McClosky (but there are two McCloskys: not the one in Harvard, I think he was[22] [at] Michigan at the time), on conservatives and liberals.[ix] He came out with the result that conservatives are distinguished by particular narrowness of mind, insensitivity to human suffering, low grade of education and other things. Now I am interested only in the methods he used. He started of course with a certain definition of what is a liberal and what is a conservative. And the question is: What is a good definition? Because if it was not good it would prejudge the whole issue and the empirical results would be of no avail . . . he studied it in present-day United States, the northern states. But from his definitions it would surely follow that a man like . . . was a

[ix] The two spell their names differently. Herbert McClosky was at the University of Michigan, Robert McCloskey was at Harvard. The article Strauss refers to is Herbert McClosky, "Conservatism and Personality," *American Political Science Review* 52 (1958): 27-45.

conservative. And Plato and Aristotle, that would be admitted anyway. But does it make sense? Is it not plainly fantastic to call these people underdeveloped and less educated than present-day political scientists? You can say this is an extreme case but a characteristic case, because this conception of science puts a premium on data which can be obtained only in present-day democratic society. This would be very good if we could be sure that these democratic societies are in every respect at the peak of human development; then of course we could rightly say why should we discuss . . . of any kind.

Student: I believe that in that same article you are referring to . . .

LS: I read something about it, but I have forgotten it, the details. I know it was an outrage, surely. I am interested not in the details of this article but in what we can learn from it beyond the idiosyncrasies of McClosky, because I believe not everyone would have said that. But the thing about [conservatives as] narrow-minded and insensitive and lack[ing][23] education could have been said also by some people other than McClosky, but that is the reason why I think I unconsciously omitted that.

The third point which I would like to mention [is what] I call its "democratism."[x] It was already implied in what was said before. These value-free social scientists need, of course, concepts. Today there is no longer a single social scientist who would say: You need only facts, and concepts are entirely useless and they will come out of the facts if you look at the facts long enough. That is no longer held, I think, by anyone. We need concepts for organizing the material, and therefore we must depend on the concepts. Now this conceptual framework is, in many cases, in an amazing way partisan. The contrast between the partisan character of the concepts and the claim to scientific objectivity is amazing. There was a school of thought—I believe it is now discredited—which made studies of the "authoritarian" and the "democratic" personalities.[xi] That was during the Second World War, I believe. Well, what did[24] [the authors] do? Did[25] [they] present the democratic and the authoritarian personalities without bias? Not a bit. The authoritarian was an ogre, an ugly ogre; and the funny thing is that these ogres occurred very frequently—even today, but surely in the past . . . I have read a book by one of these people, I forgot his name, in which he draws this conclusion, that . . . On the one side there is a strait-laced Catholic landlady, and on the other extreme there is a nice girl of loose morals. I had to make this biographic sketch, [supposing] that this is based on genuine experience of the fellow, that he got into troubles with his landlady in connection with the girl. You have this attractive girl, one value, and you have this strait-laced lady, another value—I mean strict morality—and what can you do? Well, he knows he decided for one of the two, but he says it was absolutely subjective. The shocking thing is that people who have such a limited experience in the complications of human life speak so pontifically about the impossibility of value judgments. I think one cannot observe that, see what is going on, without casting a value judgment, surely, on the author, and a value judgment which I think is not dependent on any arbitrary ground.

---

[x] That is, of value-free social science.

[xi] T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, Studies in Prejudice Series, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).

But if you want to speak about human matters, you must have some credentials for it. I would like to link this up with one motive for the present discrediting of the common good. That is also a concealed democratic premise. Now let me explain that. Democracy is of course something entirely unblameable, but the disgraceful thing is someone says it is absolutely value-free and in fact uses democratic value judgments all the time. He should at least have the courage to stand up for what he is doing as a social scientist. Of course he would say: When I write for the *New Republic*, then I assert my value judgments, but not when I write in the *American Sociological Review*. I believe that the motive for the discrediting of the concept common good, which has nothing to do with any theoretical considerations at all, is the following: When you speak of the common good, you necessarily make a value judgment. You don't make this judgment *in vacuo*: you make it among human beings living together, and then the common good has always a preference, in principle.

But there is another point. When you speak of the common good and think about it, you realize soon that not all human beings are equally capable to judge competently of the common good. I disregard entirely for the time being the famous biases of class or group, but it is [only] because of the[ir] very great complexity. Now this at the outset appears to be an argument against democracy . . . But it is not an argument against modern democracy for the very simple reason that modern democracy is based in its classic theory on the distinction between the sovereign, the people, and the government—i.e., the specific care for the common good, namely, legislation, is a matter of the government, for which the government will be responsible to the people in a very broad sense, but not in [such] a way that the people could possibly guide the government. But [there is] a certain movement in the direction of direct democracy, meaning the abolition of the distinction between the government and the sovereign . . . they are quick to assert that the people as distinguished from the government are competent, as competent as anyone can be, in taking care of the common good. There is only sectional or private good, and the task of government is not to discover the common good but merely to act as a broker between those interests[xii] —the delusion which comes in here, which we somehow identify, take for granted infinity and don't think about the problem, was stated most clearly in Hegel's critique of what he called the "bad infinity."[xiii] Bad infinity is what we ordinarily understand by infinity, the infinite sequence. I would state it as follows: Kant spoke of an infinite progress toward peace, universal peace. In other words, a state of universal peace will be reached in an infinite time. It is important to realize that this means that perfect peace will never be reached. Perfect peace in infinite time is equal to perpetual war. The only concrete meaning it could have is that war will become less and less inhuman. That leads of course to very grave practical errors, because if one party found that the enemy would be very mild in the next war, and so on, it is impossible. This fundamental fallacy

---

[xii] The tape was changed at this point. According to a student's lecture notes, at this point Strauss made a transition from a discussion of the general characteristics of positivism (reductionism, parochialism, democratism) to a discussion of the consequences of and reaction to positivism (especially existentialism or radical historicism).

[xiii] Hegel's principal discussions of "negative infinity" are *Science of Logic* (1812-16), I, 2, c #270-315 and *Encyclopedia of the Philosophic Sciences, Logic* (1817-30), #93-95.

is not sufficiently understood in the case of positivism regarding its basic premise concerning [the] infinite progress of science.

Now the second consideration, which is akin to that: positivism culminates in a philosophy of its own which calls itself "logical positivism" and which is the attempt to spell out what science means. We can say [that] for positivism, philosophy is reduced to a science of science. This science of science, logic or however it is called, may tell us in a perfectly adequate manner what science is. I doubt that, but it is in principle possible. It cannot possibly answer the question whether science is good or what the purpose of science is—it is absolutely impossible because that is a value judgment and that is excluded by definition. Now there was of course an older view, which is still lingering on because man is surely the rational animal, but that means also in practice the animal which doesn't mind contradictions at all if they are convenient. Now the older view was that science is something belonging to man. Brutes have no science. Man is an organism of a certain kind, and organisms wish to survive; therefore science is simply to be understood as the instrument of human survival. Men cannot live well without science, which would still be a value judgment. Now both the experience we have[26] regarding this complex relation of science and human survival—I trust you understand this involved remark, I am referring to the H-bomb and similar things—and also the prohibition against value judgments have made it impossible for positivism even to try to show the goodness of science or [even] what the purpose of science is. Hence the choice of science, say, by an individual young man is not strictly speaking a rational choice, not because it is particularly irrational, but because no choice is rational because every choice is based ultimately, according to this view, on so-called "ultimate values," which can be replaced by other ultimate values without becoming in any way less rational. The choice of science is not a rational choice, but what the scientist chooses when he chooses science is not merely his work, what he does, his activity, but also what we can very vaguely call the scientific view of the whole as developed up to now. This choice is a groundless choice, just as all other fundamental choices [are].

Now if this is the case, these fundamental choices, [if one prefers] science and, say, another prefers a grandiose myth and a mythical world outlook and thinks that is much better, much nicer, that cannot be argued out any more. These fundamental choices are not properly interpreted by scientific psychology for the simple reason that scientific psychology is itself a science and presupposes therefore the choice of science. Hence the fundamental phenomenon, the only phenomenon that is not hypothetical or in any way arbitrary, is this fundamental choice: the abyss of freedom, the fact that man is compelled to choose groundlessly. This fundamental experience is more fundamental than any science or myth, whatever it can be, because it is the ground of all those things. This experience of the fundamental groundless choice has been called, for good reason, the fundamental anguish. It follows from that that everything—including science, of course—must be understood ultimately in the light of this fundamental experience. Not science but the fundamental anguish is the fundamental thing. This view is now known by the name "existentialism," and I would say that I think on simple logical grounds, existentialism, however absurd it may be otherwise, is superior to positivism. One can say existentialism is the reaction of very thoughtful positivists to their own positivism. I

am willing to discuss this at some length later. Let me first finish this argument and then we will have a discussion.

Let me only say what is the key point here. The positivists—and this will not be intelligible except to those who have some familiarity with the technical discussions in present-day philosophy—the positivists today make a distinction which was wholly unknown to their ancestors, the famous British empiricists, a distinction between validity and genesis. They are concerned as logicians only with validity, what makes a validation or an invalidation. The genesis, how this happens in an individual or in a body of scientists,[27] is a psychological question of no interest to them. This distinction stems from a tradition entirely different from English empiricism, most immediately we can say from Kant.[28] This other view in its original form, the Platonic form, could be stated as follows. There is something called the mind, and the mind apprehends verities; and that is the basis of science, ultimately. In Kant that is reformulated very radically, but we cannot go into that. Here the distinction made of course sense, because the mind as mind does not have a genesis, but the mind of X and Y, the mind of you or of me and so on, of course has genesis: we were born and we grew up. Therefore the question of genesis does become important in the moment you cease to take this view that there is a mind in either the Platonic or the Kantian sense (the difference is not now important). And positivism denies that, that the mind is a being of its own; therefore it loses the right of appealing to this distinction between validity and genesis. The old-fashioned positivists, who were in this country frequently pragmatists, had a view which was more reasonable, in my opinion, because they said: "Of course science is not merely a body of propositions or something of this kind. Science is a human activity. It is an activity of that organism called man in which he engages because it fulfills a function." That also leads into difficulties, but it is at least somewhat more meaty, if I may say so, enters more into the details of the problem than positivism does.

Now this much about the modern reaction to positivism, and I can only repeat that what is now called existentialism is easily intelligible as something which arises by thinking through positivism. There is also an alternative approach to this question, and that I would like to sketch very briefly. When people talk of the distinction between facts and values they are obliged to ask this question: What is a value? Also what is a fact, but let us abbreviate this argument. What is a value? And I think they have to admit that the question, what is a value, is not a value question but a factual question. Now let a value be an object of desire, any object of desire. But then—and this reflection partly occurs in the positivist literature—a man desires an apple. But then he may fight this desire successfully and say: No, I won't eat it. Is this desire his value? Can you really call it his value, if he merely desires it? So there is a question on purely factual grounds regarding this view of value in general. Now his desire overpowers him. He cannot refrain. Then be blames himself for his failure. That is again only a nullification of the first [urge].[xiv] He does not identify himself with the desire, with the urge. His value is not identical with his urges, or more precisely stated, his values are not identical with the objects of his desires as such. Only choice can make something a man's value—choice in contradistinction to desire. The distinction now made between desire and choice is obviously a distinction

[xiv] The transcript is illegible here. Word in brackets suggested by the editor.

among facts, if we use this language. Choice means here no longer what it meant traditionally, the choice of means to ends; it means the choice of ends, or, more precisely according to this view, choice is the positing of values. This positing is taken to be a fact, as much a fact as that there are human beings.

Now if we look back we notice we have first a vulgar view according to which a value is simply any object of a desire, and another view, a more sophisticated view according to which a value is something posited and not merely desired. The vulgar view appears now to be based on an insufficient analysis of the facts, of the *is*. No distinction has been made here between desire and choice, between desire of something being available as stimulus and the positing of a value. The vulgar view is based on an insufficient analysis of the is. More precisely, to get rid now of a very common thing, of the pertinent is. Not every "is" is of interest for understanding this, only the pertinent "is"; and we see when we generalize from that that the range of values, the character of values, is determined by the is. If the "is" is any desire, the realm of values, if we can speak of it, looks entirely different, has an entirely different character than if values are essentially posited. Thus we come up against the question: Would a closer analysis of the pertinent "is," the sphere in which such things as desire and positing occur, not perhaps lead to a much more detailed understanding of values, not to this merely formal thing posited versus mere desire, or perhaps even to substantive values? Now I introduce a wholly novel expression which you must never forget. What is that pertinent "is"? It was traditionally known as the nature of man, and this is the alternative to both positivism and existentialism: to wonder whether one must not begin again to look at the nature of man in a way in which both modern science and some other forces prevent us from looking at it.

I think I leave it at this because we should have a discussion. Next time I would like to turn to a discussion of historicism. Yes?

Student: I would think that value is neither choice nor desire but judgment, and this would make for a more rational process.

LS: Can you at least explain this to me in the way in which I tried to explain the difference between positing of values and desire?

Student: I believe one would set up values, if he would do it rightly, by an evaluation, critically, of all the facts involved and therefore make a judgment.

LS: Is this evaluation then value-free, or what?

Student: No.

LS: No. I see, in other words you reject the—

Student: The very selection of the facts—

LS: Who selects the facts? I mean, what is the thing in us which selects the facts? You see, I believe my answer is formally better than yours, because I indicated the human activity involved in the two cases. In one case I said it was desire and in the other case I said it was positing of values. I mean, judgment requires some data, doesn't it? What is the difference implied in the difference between proving a Euclidean theorem and the judgment implied in a political decision? Obviously they are not the same. Since the fact–value question is now in the discussion, you must not evade the question.

Student: I would think that in the political case your interests would be more involved, economic or otherwise.

LS: Where does the question come in, if it is not a matter of facts in the crudest sense, that someone says it will cost one million, and another says it will cost one million five hundred thousand. But someone will say: That is really evil, what you want to do. Where does this element come from? Cannot two men agree about all the facts narrowly understood in a case, but the one is a decent fellow and the other is a crook? Both judge. What is the difference between the judgment of the honest man and the judgment of the crook? That I want to see.

Student: Well, the judgment of the honest man is of course better.

LS: Yes, but of course. But on what ground? Does he see more facts, or what?

Student: His judgment is more polluted or twisted. He doesn't try to give an honest evaluation of it. He uses it for ulterior motives.

LS: But didn't you say that everyone—and I suppose you didn't wish to impugn my honesty. I said if the difference between a mathematical judgment and a political judgment is that in a political judgment an economic interest comes in, an ulterior motive if there ever was one.

Student: . . . need to be more careful in those circumstances where your personal interests are involved.

LS: But still, must you not say something about—since we are confronted with the difference between facts and values—this distinction [that] is imposed on us for the time being? We must face it. Now the crude fellows say the value is something desired. The more sophisticated say the value is something posited by a free act and not merely giving in slavishly to desires. Can you tell us,[29] if you have to accept this language, where goodness or badness comes in, or for that matter where value comes in? How would you describe that? If you say merely that the honest man is broader than the dishonest man, that is not simply true: there can be very sophisticated crooks and extremely simple honest men. I would like to know that. In other words, I would try to help you in the way in which you try to help me, namely, prevent you from evading an issue.

Student: I guess you have to start from somewhere, a standard definition of a human being, and exclude the human tigers because—

LS: The human tigers? But still I believe they are also human beings. This can be proven very simply, because they procreate and generate human beings. I think you have to do that. I don't see why it is absolutely necessary to start with a definition of man. Illustrations are infinitely more instructive.

Student: I would think there is an inherent striving in man, by the construction of his mind and his psychological nature, to—

LS: May I help you? I make a suggestion which I believe you will reject, but I would like to place it before you. Would you say that what is now called values are in fact neither objects of desire unqualified nor values posited, but natural ends, ends toward which man is by nature inclined? Would you say that? Then I understand. But that is neither positivism nor historicism; but that is what good old Aristotle meant, and some others. That is a different story. Yes?

Student: I understand when you say that we should go about and examine human nature again . . . but I'm not clear as to exactly how to do this without taking into account perhaps different cultures and looking at human nature from the point of view of what human nature has accomplished through history, which would bring in the difference between the Eastern cultures or the Hindu concept of civilization, and the Western. Wouldn't common sense applied in those two different situations conceivably yield a different picture of what human nature is?

LS: That could be. But I believe it would not be wise to proceed this way, at least not for one circumstanced as I am, for example, because what we can know of these very deep and difficult things is, I believe, very superficial. Regardless of whether the picture of Hindu thought or Chinese thought is transmitted to us by a Westerner or by an Easterner, the danger of Westernization in the presentation is terrific. I remember one of my first students at the University of Chicago was a Hindu student who wrote his doctor's thesis on the so-called Indian Machiavelli. I always forget his name.[xv] There were terms which he used which were familiar to me from the West—sovereignty and so on. I didn't believe a word of it. Not because I knew Sanskrit, I knew nothing, but I knew so much about the conditions and the reflections which had gone into this Western thought, into these Western concepts, that I didn't believe that this was likely to be the case elsewhere. At any rate, after quite a few very intensive[30] [discussions], I finally brought him to a specific term,[31] [for] which I was in dependence to him. I remember the term. It was *dharma*. Then I asked him to please write it down in Sanskrit and then in transcription. Then I said: What is it? By a long questioning and cross-questioning I finally got an inkling of what that meant, but that was really worse than what happens in a dentist's chair. I believe this is a very key term I learned this on this occasion, but there are other terms of the same kind. I think the condition [for understanding another culture] is truly to learn the language, and not what you need to know in order to live in the Hilton hotel

[xv] Probably Kautilya (c. 350-283 B.C.E.), author of Arthashasta.

in Calcutta. Do you see my point? I believe it is more profitable for someone who for one reason or another cannot afford to devote his entire life to the study of Chinese or of anything else of this kind to start at home. In the first place, we have to recover a very rich, incredibly rich inheritance which we have, which is now lost for all practical purposes. What is merely historically known is lost. To the extent to which it is no longer applied in our situation, it is no longer alive. Only then will it be possible, when we come to limits of Western understanding, to be open to these other things and to become avid, not as idle curiosity-seekers but as thinking men, to get some help. That is practically better, I believe.

Student: What is the intrinsic connection between reductionism and positivist philosophy? I am asking this because as far as I can tell, Aristotle is not altogether without, what looks to me, like a reductionism of his own.

LS: Namely?

Student: Like dividing society into its parts.

LS: That's not reductionism. You mean at the beginning of the *Politics*, for example? No, that's not reductionism. The thing is made for an antireductionist purpose, to make clear the essential difference between the household and the city. Someone had said—Aristotle says so—that there is no essential difference between the city and the household: the city is only a larger household. Aristotle tries to prove to him: No, you are wrong, there is an essential difference. That is the key point. This word which we use so easily, "essential difference,"[32] is absolutely crucial. This word implies a word which is used with greater repugnance: essence—"essential" being derived from "essence." The fact that there are essential differences was discovered on a high level of reflection by Greek philosophy, I think one can say, by Socrates and surely by Aristotle, [and Greek philosophy] is in a way the classic exponent of the view that the whole consists of essentially different parts. Let us look then at positivism and at modern science. Modern science, we can say, comes into being by denying essence. The so-called essential differences are surface differences. The essential differences have something to do—they are not identical—with the qualities of things. These qualities had to be split into two kinds in order to make modern thought possible: the primary and the secondary qualities. The secondary qualities are the sensible qualities, color, sound, etc., and the primary qualities are such things as extension, impenetrability or whatever the proper word is; in other words, the character of mere matter in a former stage of Western thought. Now mere matter is everywhere the same, in a dog, or in a man, or in a tree, or in a rock. From this point of view the ideal task of understanding any of these beings we distinguish empirically as essentially different would be to give their formulae, as it were, in terms of things which belong to matter as matter. That is of course a gross oversimplification, but it is substantially true, and that is essential reductionism.

One can also state it as follows, going back to the[33] [classic statements] of this change. The old universals—man, dog, tree, for whatever there was a species or a genus—the old universals must be replaced by a new kind of universals. That was understood. You must

have concepts, you must have universals. But what kind of concepts? For example, there is a book (which is translated into English) by Cassirer, *Concept of Substance and Concept of Function*;[xvi] that was one attempt made in our century to explain what the peculiarity of the modern scientific concept is: not substance, but function. I try to make it understood. Aristotle above all, but within certain limits surely also Plato, was guided in his understanding by "the thing." There are all kinds of things or beings which are essentially different from one another, and without being[34] concerned [now] with the difference between artifacts and natural things, a chair and a dog, there are all kinds of things. Each of these things has qualities. In modern times, the universals were meant to open up to us not the thing with its qualities but functional relations between series of events. Do you see? That is an entirely different orientation.

But the crucial point for our present purpose and with a view to your question is this:[35] It is the essence of modern science to attempt to understand, for example, the living beings in terms of inanimate things: biophysics, biochemistry and all this kind of thing. There was a statement made by our chancellor some time ago[xvii] which again reveals this very common view, the true understanding of living beings would be the reduction of the living being to a particular conglomeration or constellation of inanimate matter. Surely the same applies to the difference between the mind, the human mind, and those qualities or characters which are common to all living beings. The human mind can only be a modification of such things as sense perception, memory, and so on. You must have heard of the formula, what is the difference between man and his nearest kin? Man manipulates verbal symbols—this little thing, verbal symbols, as if the use of words, of language, were not of the utmost importance in every respect and would not even affect the sense perceptions and these so-called physiological things. The reductionism is absolutely essential, and the difficulties of that were solved in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by a simple device, by so-called "dualistic metaphysics." Descartes: there is extended substance, that is matter practically; and the cogitating, the thinking substance. There is no possible bridge between them. The living things [other than man] cease to be of any importance—they are dismissed as machines, as you know. Then you have the[36] thinking beings, empirically speaking, men. As long as this so-called dualistic metaphysics[37] was still admitted, the difficulties were not very great [because this metaphysics taught there is a substance called "the soul"]. But then through people like Hume and Kant, the substantialist conception of the soul—you know, its faculties—was thrown out. There is no known soul-substance. For every sensible man there is a radical difference between specifically human things and[38] specifically subhuman things. Then German idealism, Kant, Hegel, and so on, tried to save the radical difference between men and brutes by a non-dualistic metaphysics of one kind or another. That is a very long and difficult story to which I cannot refer, not only for reasons of time, but [also because] I would have to think about it properly.

[xvi] Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, trans. William Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923). [Ernst Cassirer, Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff: Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1910)]

[xvii] Strauss is probably referring to George W. Beadle, a geneticist, who replaced Robert Maynard Hutchins as chancellor of the University in 1951 and served in that position until 1960.

I mention only one point, and that can be the transition to what I say next time. On the academic level, in the second half of the nineteenth century and a considerable part of the twentieth, the problem arose in this one could almost say bureaucratic or administrative form. The old materialism of Hobbes and the French materialists and such people had been replaced by positivism, which was emphatically according to its claim not metaphysics. It didn't say anything about ultimate reality, it spoke only about knowledge and especially about the highest form of knowledge, science. The positivists said there is only one kind of science, natural science, and the social sciences must model themselves on the natural sciences. That was a very fundamental view. "Unity of science" is the key term, I believe, of present-day positivism. Unity of sciences means [conforming to] the model of the natural sciences. Then there were people,[39] especially in Germany, who said: Look at what the best historians do. And you know the nineteenth century was very much concerned with historical studies. Then it appeared that this[xviii] is something radically different from what the natural sciences do. The belief of the positivists that what the historians do is only to collect material which will later be used for the formulation of laws, in the sense of the natural sciences, has no basis in fact. The old metaphysical distinction between matter and mind was replaced by the methodological distinction or epistemological distinction between the methods of the natural sciences and the methods of the cultural or historical sciences. This is the impoverished relic of a once profound tradition. For example, when I went to school this question was in this form still much agitated. I believe to some extent it [still] is, even here.[xix] And I wanted to say this to you, that pure positivists without any influence of historicism are extremely rare; also on the other hand, pure historicists who are not tinged with positivism are extremely rare. You know that all kinds of fusions have taken place. If you read such things as Carl Becker, you know, the famous American historian of the last generation, you will see he is no longer a positivist old-style. Was he the man who said "every man is his own historian" or something of this kind,[xx] in other words, asserting the radical subjectivity of history. That could not be done by a positivist, because a positivist would say: If you abandon the universality of cognitive effort, you deny that it's cognitive. This may become a little clearer when I discuss very succinctly, much too succinctly, historicism.

One [other] point I should make. What I said today about existentialism is, if you think it through, a radical historicism. That is the same issue, although it did in no way appear in what I said. Perhaps we take it up next time. I would say today it seems to me that the schools which are powerful today—disregarding neo-Thomism, the appeal of which is mostly limited to Catholics—the schools characteristic today and most powerful are positivism on the one hand and historicism or existentialism on the other. Of the older schools,[40] say, German idealism and so on, you find only here and there an individual who calls himself a Hegelian or a Kantian, but that is no longer a public power as such.

[xviii] Namely, what historians do.

[xix] That is, in the United States.

[xx] Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," Annual address of the president of the American Historical Association, delivered at Minneapolis, December 29, 1931. See *American Historical Review* 37 (1931): 221-36

For this reason I must limit my introductory remarks entirely to those two ways of thinking. One last question.

Student: This is a question in regard to the relationship of desires and choice. Isn't this very similar to the very distinction between desires and choice made by some positivists themselves when they take up the question of determinism, in the sense that they say the desires are things that at least have a physical base and they to a great extent explain what the determined action will be, but that given this physicalistic base the choices that men make between alternatives open to them is [a] choice, and they reject determinism on this ground?

LS: It is absolutely necessary to reject determinism, because if determinism is strictly understood, if this is the individual as fully determined by environment, inheritance, and so on, and this is his value, if there is a strict one-to-one relation between the two, the whole issue would never arise. Everyone has by necessity at each time the value to which he is determined. There would be no question of that. The mere fact that the question arises shows the impossibility of simple determinism. Incidentally, in the other point I also think you are right. From time to time you see a certain awareness that desire and, say, choice or whatever you call it are not identical. That's quite true. But I believe they don't draw the consequences from that. In addition, you can't even stop at that, because that is a very primitive distinction. You have to go much beyond that to say something relevant. Good. So we meet again next time, I hope.

---

[1] Deleted "that."
[2] Deleted "as if I were."
[3] Deleted "the."
[4] Deleted "occasionally made."
[5] Deleted "here."
[6] Deleted "to be aware of the limitations of our culture requires."
[7] Deleted "the use of"
[8] Deleted "which."
[9] Deleted "then."
[10] Deleted "that this."
[11] Deleted "whatever you like"
[12] Deleted "of the point."
[13] Deleted "a."
[14] Deleted "he discusses."
[15] Deleted "that"
[16] Deleted "the."
[17] Deleted "the."
[18] Deleted "of this."
[19] Deleted "by."
[20] Deleted "the culture of this gang."
[21] Moved "he asked."
[22] Deleted "in."
[23] Deleted "of."
[24] Deleted "he."
[25] Deleted "he."
[26] Deleted "made."
[27] Deleted "this."

[28] Deleted “in.”
[29] Deleted “how.”
[30] Deleted “trainings.”
[31] Deleted “on.”
[32] Deleted “it.”
[33] Deleted “classics.”
[34] Moved “now.”
[35] Deleted “Modern science.”
[36] Deleted “free.”
[37] Deleted “which meant there is a substance called the soul.”
[38] Deleted “the.”
[39] Deleted “and that was.”
[40] Deleted “say like.”

Session 6: October 18, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: I would like to devote today's lecture to the subject I called historicism. But in order to have the maximum [amount] of clarity, I have to repeat a few words regarding the other position which is powerful today, which I called positivism. Now the positivistic position is then that the only form of genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge, and the model of scientific knowledge is that supplied by the natural sciences. Positivism maintains the idea of science as a universal transcultural pursuit. In other words, the fact that someone is a Westerner or an Easterner is of no relevance as far as he is a scientist, and it keeps alive the demand for the unity of science. In addition, it acts as if science were the highest perfection of man, although positivism is unable to maintain this. So these are the points where positivism is linked to the old great Western tradition in spite of the radical modifications. Now within political science, positivism has the merit of having reasserted that law, positive law, is secondary or derivative, in contrast to a certain purely legalistic approach which played a considerable role around 1900. But positivism has failed to identify the primary, that which is primary to mere law. Generally speaking, positivism calls that [thing which is primary to law] within political science[1] power.

But this is much too vague and even misleading. And there is another point where positivism has, in social and political science, relative merit. Since the eighteenth century especially, the attempt was frequently made to explain institutions in terms of the environment and other natural data, and if this is taken strictly it means that wherever you find any institutions, say, polygamy, monogamy, or whatever you have, these are exactly the institutions demanded by the environment. In other words, all institutions, however contradictory, are sensible or rational because they are the best solution of the social problem for the people circumstanced as the people are. Now this is,[2] I think, rather generally abandoned, and the predominant view seems to be that we ultimately come back in the analysis of institutions to values which cannot be reduced to anything else. I suppose those of you who went to the Chicago College[ii] have read the book by Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*,[iii] and even others who have not gone to Chicago may have read it. Now if you look at this book, the key point, it seems to me, is this. You take two Northern American Indian tribes of the same race living under the same climatic and other conditions, and the one tribe is gentle and the other is tough. There is no explanation possible beyond the fact that tribe A at one time decided in favor of gentleness, and the other decided in favor of harshness. This is, however, if we take a somewhat broader view, merely a restoration of a classical view, a classical Greek view

---

[i] See Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," in *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, 1988), chap. 2. Originally published in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10 (1949): 30-50. See also "What is Political Philosophy?" part 1; and *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), chap. 1.

[ii] The College of the University of Chicago.

[iii] Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), American anthropologist, author of *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

according to which the ultimate at which you arrive in the analysis of social institutions is *nomos*, convention or agreement, in contradistinction to *physis* or nature. I mention this only to[3] [show] that something is changing in spite of the fundamentally absurd doctrine, the general positivistic doctrine which compels us to reconsider certain thoughts which have been thrown out for generations.

Later on I will show that Aristotle's theme is in a way indicated by this relative innovation in political or social science, namely, the secondary character of law, positive law; and furthermore, the fact that in analyzing social institutions you arrive eventually at something which looks like a fiat of society. The Aristotelian analysis reminds of it, has something to do with it, [as] I will only indicate in very general terms. For Aristotle, the fundamental and basic social fact is what he calls the *politeia*, which I translate by the regime—which is much more precise than merely power, although it has very much to do with power—and every regime has a specific end, purpose, to which it is dedicated. Of course Aristotle would deny that these ends cannot be criticized and cannot be judged, but up to a point there is an agreement between [Aristotle and] a view which is gradually crystallizing within present-day political science.

Now the fundamental difficulties of positivism—which are not faced by positivism—lead, given the modern premises, to existentialism or radical historicism. Now how is that? I will restate that briefly. Positivism is at best giving an adequate answer to the question: What is science? But it is unable to answer the question: Why science? I.e., it cannot articulate the human context of science. This human context of science is however essentially changing and various. There is the change in time, the different epochs; and there is a difference in place or space, cultures. This variety of epochs and cultures has to be considered in the moment we transcend the mere question of what is science and raise the question: Why science? Science then proves to belong to different epochs and to different cultures and proves to be decisively affected by the different epochs and different cultures. Science then proves to be dependent on history with a capital H. The fundamental phenomenon, i.e., the phenomenon beyond which we cannot go in any analysis, is not science but history. That we can say is the historicist thesis. For positivism the ultimate phenomenon, the phenomenon beyond which you cannot go, is truly science. That science emerges under certain conditions and is affected by all kinds of things is not according to positivism an essential element of science itself. That is only the question of the genesis of science, and this question of genesis does not affect the substance of science. The substance is affected by the question of the validity of science, what makes scientific statements valid or invalid, and that is the highest theme of the human mind according to positivism, "that beyond which you cannot go." According to historicism that is not true: science itself belongs to a larger matrix, and if we try to give that matrix a name we cannot but call it history with a capital H.

Now this is easy to say but very hard to understand, and I will try to help you in understanding it. Now when we speak today of history, and especially when we use it with a capital H, we understand by History an object of human knowledge—as some people say, a dimension of reality different from, say, nature or whatever else we might distinguish it from. Now this notion of history is of very recent date. The word "history,"

as you can imagine or as some of you will know, is of very recent date. And it means originally something like "inquiry," or the records of inquiry which we have completed, and is by no means limited to what we call historical inquiry. Natural science is in a way called history. Still, the term "natural history" is still used, at least it was used when I was a boy, and we learned botany and zoology as natural history without any thought of evolution. The very description of the various species of trees and so on was called natural history. So history means originally just inquiry, but it takes on a special meaning: such inquiry as cannot be completed except by inquiring with other men. If you investigate a tree, you don't need in principle any other men, but if you want to find out what happened before you were born in your community or elsewhere, then you have to inquire with other people. By the virtue of this limitation, then, history in the sense of inquiry becomes history in the sense of historical inquiry: what happened before you in the past or at places in the world where you could not be present.

At any rate, there is no philosophy of history in classical antiquity, and—well, you can do anything if you are bent on doing it by hook and by crook, but it is not possible for anyone who understands, say, Plato and Aristotle to ascribe to them a philosophy of history. I would say the same is true even of the Bible, and I will limit myself only to a very simple and a most pedantic remark. The Old Testament is written in Hebrew, and there is no Hebrew word for history. The Hebrew word for history is simply the Greek word *historia*, taken in modern times from the Western tradition.[4] That is only an external but I believe important designation of the problem, that when the word "philosophy of history" was coined by Voltaire,[iv] around 1750, there it simply meant the philosophic study of the records of human doings and sufferings; but prior to that the word didn't exist. But whatever may be true of philosophy of history, history as an object, that came to sight only in modern times; and the genesis of history, not as historiography but as the object of historiography, this genesis is very insufficiently known. The so-called historians of history (there are a few, not many, which are very valuable) all take this notion for granted and therefore impute an awareness or divining of history with a capital H to earlier thinkers. That is one of the most important historical tasks before the coming generation, to understand the genesis of history as a so-called dimension of reality, as an object. It is a very difficult task, and one can say almost nothing has been done (that is, to my knowledge) for making this possible.

Now I must limit myself here to the most massive points. What is implied originally in something which we now would call history? The historical process, a sequence of the ages that is of course old and goes back to later biblical thought, and to some extent even to classical thought. There is a sequence of ages. For example, there was a Greek age and there was a Roman age, and before them there were Persia and Babylonia. Then there came the Christian or the Islamic age, and so on. Now the first thing, the sequence of the ages, is an empirical fact. But now it is assumed that the sequence of ages is meaningful. This, one can say, is implied in the notion of divine providence. But the belief in divine providence is not sufficient for making possible modern historical consciousness, because the belief in providence means of course that the ways of God are not the ways of man. Providence is inscrutable. The modern view comes into being, as people say, when the

[iv] See Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'espirit des nations* (1756).

belief in providence becomes secularized, i.e., when the sequence of ages is believed to be not only meaningful but also that man can know its meaningfulness, can see why Greece had to follow on Persia, or whatever the case may be, and why this marks[5] progress. So the belief in progress as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is indeed the early form of historicism.

But there is another condition which is usually not considered. The notion of progress is in itself very old. There was a Greek word for that, [*prokope*],[v] and of course Aristotle knew quite well or believed to know that there was a progress in philosophy from Thales[vi] via Plato to him. He shows that in the first book of the *Metaphysics*. And Thucydides's *History* gives a description of the progress from primitive barbarism, where Greeks were not yet different from barbarians, to the peak of the Periclean Age. And there are even remarks in later classical writers, allusions even in Aristotle that there is possible in principle an infinite progress, if a limited one, in the future. There is a remark in the first book of the *Politics* that the arts, say, medicine, are susceptible of infinite progress; in other words, of infinite refinement, more and more.[vii] But the modern belief in progress is distinguished from the classical views by one premise which is extremely rare, we can say, in older times, namely, that there is an essential harmony between the progress of the arts or intellectual progress and social progress. And the basis is this: art, intellectual activities, science,[6] [were] understood in a new manner in the seventeenth century. According to this view science is necessarily diffused among the nonscientists. It is propagated among nonscientists, and by becoming diffused in society science becomes a public power, becomes in a way *the* public power. This is the famous thought underlying the so-called Enlightenment, and it began in the way that some elegant Frenchmen in the late seventeenth century—the most famous man is Fontenelle[viii]—wrote presentations of the new view of the universe for duchesses and countesses. And that was the first, but later on you have mathematics for the millions and so on.

Now I am only interested[7] [in] this principle. But let us consider what was the point. Whenever you speak of progress, you presuppose standards or an end with a view to which you establish the fact of progress or maybe of decay. How can you establish that? This end in the light of which you see progress is not known from history but from, say, moral or political philosophy; and moral and political philosophy was meant to be a philosophical discipline, i.e., not a historical discipline. In other words, the traditional separation between philosophy and history, which existed from the very beginning, remained intact until the late eighteenth century and even beyond. So progress was an assertion regarding history. It was not strictly speaking a philosophic assertion; the philosophic assertions had to do with the end. In fact it is somewhat more complicated, but I must cut out all subtleties now in order to bring out the points of most importance to us here.

---

[v] There is a blank space in the original transcript. It is likely that Strauss said "*prokope*" here.
[vi] Thales (c. 624–c. 646 BC), a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher and mathematician.
[vii] Aristotle, *Politics* 1257b25.
[viii] Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757), French scientist and man of letters. The most well known of his popularized presentation of the new natural science is *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686).

Now in the nineteenth century, in the early nineteenth century a radical change became visible. Let me try to describe that. The starting point, the most simple starting point for us can be taken [as] the fact of the variety of moral and political philosophies, the anarchy of deductions in this field. Well, political philosophy always wanted to find the moral or political truth. Whether that was Plato or Aristotle or Machiavelli or Hobbes or Locke or Rousseau,[8] [made no] difference. In this they were all united. And yet every commonsensical observer must say: Well, there are seventeen leading men, [and] every one contradicts everyone else—there must be something wrong. And this was always known. This suspicion always existed. But in former times, people drew a very simple conclusion from that, namely, a skeptical conclusion: This is not knowledge. But you could also look at it from another point of view which seems to be more intelligent. In the light of the idea of progress, this variety of political and moral philosophies—[ix9]

Now where was I? The variety of moral and political philosophies, which seem to show the impossibility of moral and political philosophy. Yet you could also look at it from a different point of view, especially if you had some notion of progress. You could then try to discern an order in this chaos, in this variety. For example, Plato's teaching is radically different from that of John Locke, without any question, but Plato belongs to 380 B.C., the Greek city, especially Athens after the Peloponnesian War, and Locke belongs to 1688 A.D. So that is it. Each moral and political philosophy belongs to its time and is true for its time but not beyond. It expresses its time. Now if this is enlarged, as becomes necessary, to all branches of philosophy, to all branches of knowledge, we reach the conclusion that all human thought, however high, pure, abstract, essentially belongs to a time.[10] [In] the classical formula of Hegel, the individual is a son of his time.[x] And by the individual he meant of course the most thoughtful individual, in his purest thought, is a son of his time.[11] That was developed in a complete way for the first time by Hegel. But this leads of course to very great difficulties, as you can see immediately if you think that your most cherished convictions, for which you are willing to die, are also only convictions for a time, which a hundred years after you will appear to be very questionable. How can you dedicate yourself to something of which you know in advance that it is dated? Now Hegel knew that very well, and therefore his philosophy of history has this important limitation. Hegel agreed with the old political philosophers by saying there must be the true political philosophy, and he claimed of course that this was his. But the difference between Hegel and all his predecessors was that he conceived of his political philosophy not only as being the true political philosophy, but as the final political philosophy. The final. In other words, its place in the historical process was part of the proof of its truth.[xi12] —and all earlier political philosophies contain an element of the truth; they are not simply false but incomplete. But Hegel still maintained of course that his philosophy also belongs to a time. How could he reconcile the finality of his philosophy and the fact that it belongs to a time? Very simply: his time is the final time, the absolute time, the absolute moment. It was along these lines.

[ix] There was an interruption at this point regarding use of the classroom.

[x] *Philosophy of History*, preface.

[xi] Another interruption regarding the use of the classroom required the class to relocate to another room. When the recording resumes, the lecture is already in progress.

An absolute time was recognized in the Christian tradition, the year one, or as more generally stated, redemption. Christianity is the absolute religion, final religion. Hegel starts in a way from that, but Hegel interprets it somewhat differently. Christianity was originally, when it was in its original primitive form, naturally in opposition to the world, the world being pagan; and it took a very, very long time until the world became pervaded by Christianity—the world, that is also called in Latin *saeculum*—until the saeculum became Christian or, differently stated, until Christianity became secularized.[13] [These are] the same thing from Hegel's point of view, the perfect synthesis of Christianity and the saeculum. And the most important steps from Hegel's point of view were the Reformation and the Enlightenment, culminating in the French Revolution. To put it very simply, in the French Revolution, according to Hegel, the rights of man, the absolute dignity of the individual [14]regardless of any natural characteristics, was recognized as the basis of the social order. And [this equality] was not regarding only his fate after life or in the eyes of God, but [it] became the basis of the ordering of society. And the technical expression [for this] is the rights of man. Of course, on the other hand the French Revolution was also a great terror, as Hegel emphasized, but what was wrong with the French Revolution was not the principle, namely, the rights of man. As Hegel put it, the French Revolution was the first attempt of man to stand on his head. That he did not mean as a criticism . . . we would have a rational society on the basis of the only rational principle, namely, the fundamental equality of all men. What was wrong with the French Revolution was an insufficient understanding of the fact that government is something fundamentally different from what we might call the sovereign people. And therefore the end of this great history was not the very imperfect arrangement of the French Revolution but, in a way, Napoleon. In his very early writings Hegel thought that Napoleon—in other words, a very strong government based on the rights of man [in a society in which] every Napoleonic soldier, poor or rich, noble or *villein,*[xii] could become a marshal of France. So a strong government on a fundamentally egalitarian basis, the full equality of opportunity, that was the order. Hegel rewrote his doctrine, we can say, after the defeat of Napoleon, and then he found the best order at any rate in the post-revolutionary state, to some extent in the postrevolutionary Prussian state. That is not a question of the greatest importance, I mean how he identified it in particular.

Now this historical process—which necessarily leads to an end as we can see only at the end of the process, prior to that we couldn't see that—is the gradual revelation of the truth, of reason with a capital R. The historical process is rational and complete. Both things are necessary. If it were not completed, you could not know of its rationality. I mean, you don't know if a tolerable rational solution might not necessarily lead into its opposite. One can say, and that is of course a very partial truth but it is not misleading in our context, philosophy came now to mean almost the understanding of the historical process, the contemplation of the historical process as a rational and completed process. This is very roughly what Hegel said. Historicism can be understood as emerging from Hegel on the following premises, on the basis of the following deviation from Hegel. Historicism maintains the essential historical character of human thought, namely, that the individual is essentially a son of his time, or that there is nothing in a man's thought

[xii] *Villein* refers to anyone below the rank of knight in a feudal society.

by which he transcends his time. But historicism, in contradistinction to Hegel, says history is neither rational nor completed. And this raises of course infinite difficulties: that our thoughts, our highest thoughts should be dependent on history and yet the historical process is not rational.

Hegel's view was attacked already in his time by the historians proper. The most famous among them was the German historian Ranke,[xiii] who is well known for having made the statement that all epochs are equal before God or the truth.[xiv] In other words, if we take this literally, there is no progress. Men can at all times have a direct relation to the absolute. Now let us enlarge that far beyond what Ranke ever meant. We reach this view: there is an equality of all epochs and of all cultures. This is the view of present-day ordinary historical relativism. The immediate consequence of this is that the most important study of man, which is *the* study of man, consists in the contemplation of all epochs or all cultures—what you find practically in the so-called general civilization courses in college but on the higher level, I mean on the level of research, a universal history which treats with perfect impartiality and without any preference all epochs and all cultures. It claims to be absolutely objective, so that the situation of the historian and his belonging to this or that epoch or this culture or that culture is wholly irrelevant. Otherwise it would not be objective in this sense.

Now this view, which was particularly powerful in Germany—generally speaking, Germany has been the country of historicism more than any other country up to the present day—this view was attacked with very great power by Nietzsche in a famous essay "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History," [from] around 1873. I forgot the exact date. That is a very important essay, and I can state here only the key point as far as our argument is concerned. Objective history is strictly speaking impossible, because the historian himself stands in the historical stream. He necessarily belongs to an epoch and to a culture. Even his individuality is relative, not only the epoch and the culture to which he belongs. Historical objectivity is strictly speaking impossible. Now this must be enlarged, as it was not only to history but also to the other forms of human knowledge, especially the natural sciences. And the argument, as stated powerfully by Nietzsche but more [so] later on: science is of course also culture-bound, epoch-bound. Science, what we call science, is Western science. This doesn't mean that non-Westerners cannot become scientists, but it means that in becoming scientists they become to that extent Westerners. This view [was] popularized by Spengler in his *Decline of the West* in his view, for example, regarding mathematics. There is Greek mathematics, there is Babylonian mathematics, Chinese mathematics, and modern mathematics; each belongs to its own culture and it is absurd to say that modern mathematics is superior to Babylonian mathematics. Within the modern context, only modern mathematics makes sense, just as in the Babylonian context only Babylonian mathematics made sense.

Now this view which came out of Nietzsche (and it took a very long time, practically until after the First World War, but the foundations were stated by Nietzsche) is what I

[xiii] Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), German historian.

[xiv] See von Ranke, *Über die epochen der neuren geschichte*, ed. Alfred Dove, 1888, IX/2, First lecture, "Weltgeschichte."

call radical historicism, or that is the same as existentialism. And that is distinguished from the earlier form of historicism because it is no longer merely contemplative. The historian cannot be merely a looker-on with objectivity: he is part of the process. Therefore historical objectivity in the old sense is impossible. Today this view I believe is rather popular in this country too. I remind you of Carl Becker,[xv] although I forgot his formula at the moment—but you are a historian, I believe.[xvi] No? But some of you will have read the writings of Carl Becker, where he emphasizes this very strongly, the historical relativity of every historical interpretation. The Civil War, the war between the states, looked differently in 1870 than in 1900, and again in 1960, and that is due not merely to the fact that new evidence has been forthcoming which was not available then, but because the point of view has changed. Americans in 1960 look differently at things than they did around 1900, and they are different people; and therefore their history and what they think about history must be radically different.

We can describe this radical historicism by a few formulae. We can say that radical historicism is characterized by the complete fusion of philosophy and history. The traditional distinction between a transhistorical philosophy and history has been abandoned. Philosophy is essentially history, and history, if it is more than a mere collection of data, must be philosophic. Differently stated, all human thought depends ultimately on something which it cannot comprehend or at which it cannot look from the outside,[15] [namely], objectively, while however human thought can be aware of that. People would, for example, refer to the fact that there is an essential dependence of human thought, however refined or abstruse, on language. And while science or thought is according to its own claim universal, belonging to man as man, language is essentially particular, that [language] of a particular group of men. Another common formula is that human thought[16] has a specific horizon at each period: each epoch, each culture has a specific horizon which it cannot transcend. Traditional philosophy assumed that there is *the* horizon, the absolute horizon, the natural horizon. That is denied here: human thought rests on premises which differ from epoch to epoch, premises which are not self-evident simply for man as man but only for the epoch in question. In every epoch there are certainties or convictions, however you call them, which are self-evident, but only for that epoch or for that culture. That can also be expressed as follows: thought rests ultimately on premises which are imposed on it by fate. And this expression means to say that it is not possible to explain these premises any more. The term "fate" is meant to indicate that. Now historical explanation, why we hold these convictions which we hold, is fundamentally impossible, because the explanation would make use of the so-called categories which are the ultimate premises, behind which we cannot go. Every social explanation already presupposes these absolute presuppositions, these fundamental convictions which therefore cannot be explained. One can also say, as I said before: no objectivity, strictly speaking, is possible. The distinction between objective and subjective is replaced by the distinction between the superficial or the derivative and the profound. In other words, allowance is made for the fact that men in a very general way from all kinds of cultures or epochs could agree although speaking different languages, that this is a matter of degree; but that is of course the least interesting, [for] whenever

[xv] "Everyman his own historian." See session 5, n. xx.
[xvi] Strauss evidently addresses a student or other member of the class.

you turn to anything of any consequence, go deeper, there is necessarily fundamental disagreement. Here I repeat what I said before about the difference between positivism and historicism. For positivism, the ultimate premises are either identically the same always for all men, say, the principle of contradiction, or else the premises are consciously fabricated hypotheses; whereas historicism asserts that the ultimate premises are neither identically the same always nor consciously fabricated but are imposed by fate.

A few more words before we start a provisional discussion. I would like to explain to you what the fusion of philosophy and history means in a way which is most plausible. Now one can say very generally that philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion about the most important things by knowledge. That is what traditional philosophy always thought. Now in order to replace the opinions by knowledge, we must first be aware of what our opinions are. We must state them: we must clarify them, as we would say. Now when we try to clarify our opinions on whatever subject it might be, whether it is sovereignty, whether it is natural law, whether it is power, or whatever it might be, we find in almost all cases, we find in all interesting cases that these opinions are not our opinions. These opinions prove to be inherited opinions. In order to clarify the opinions we must go back to their origins and must see how they have become transformed until they are what they are now. So the clarification of opinions necessarily takes on, so it seems, the character of a study of the genesis of our opinions. But this clarification of opinions is not a historian's job as such; it is a philosophic job, because the clarification of opinions is an integral element of the philosophic enterprise. So the philosophic task insensibly shifts into historical task. If we consider our experience now in the present generation, both young and old, one can say that this argument is for all practical purposes invincible. It is open to great theoretical difficulties, but for all practical purposes it is undeniable. And you see it very simply when you look at anything a historically sophisticated man says about any fundamental concept and compare it with what any so-called logical analysts say about it, the logical analysts who do as such not go into historical questions. This logical analysis is characterized by an amazing emptiness and poverty, whereas an intelligent historical study of, say, power or sovereignty is something where we obviously learn something. This much for my general remarks.

I believe that if you are not informed about these matters,[17] you should read something about it. There is a statement which is useful, I believe, [in] the most recent Aquinas Lecture, Marquette University Press, *Metaphysics and Historicity*, [by] Mr. Fackenheim.[xvii] This is in a way very European, but nevertheless it is I think readable, and it gives you perhaps a better notion of what the situation is at least than anything I have read in English in recent years. In the English literature on this theme I believe by far the most interesting writer is R. G. Collingwood.[xviii] His *Idea of History* contains very interesting parts. As a whole it is an unfortunate book: the author hadn't finished it, and

---

[xvii] Emil L. Fackenheim, *Meatphysics and Historicity, The Aquinas Lecture* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1961).

[xviii] R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943), English philosopher, historian, and archaeologist, author of *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946) and *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

his executor did his best; he put the manuscript together, and this is most unsatisfactory as a book. On the other hand, he wrote a book called *An Autobiography* in 1938. This is a book which I believe every one of you will find enjoyable. It is a sprightly book, and I believe, as a very genuine incentive to philosophy and a practical proof of the necessity of philosophy, it is probably unique in the English language in our century. I will say something later on about Collingwood in order not to get too general and diffuse.

First I would like to find out whether I have made myself understood. Did it become clear that there is a fundamental difference between positivism and historicism? I am not interested in this, how shall I say it, gossipy kind of question or statistical kind of question, [of] how these two schools are divided numerically and by countries and this kind of thing. Most people living today of a scholarly complexion, vulgarly called intellectuals, are somewhere in between. Positivists influence historicists and vice versa. But it is necessary to make a clear-cut distinction, and I think the best criterion for distinguishing them is this. The positivists believe that modern science, especially modern natural science, is the highest form of thinking orientation which man ever devised and which in principle, not the details, is simply the highest, and the historicists question that. For the radical historicist, modern science is simply one historical form among many others, and it is only by fate that it is imposed on us.

Student: In your book *Natural Right and History*, you treat historicism before considering the distinction between facts and values, and in these lectures you have taken the opposite—

LS: Shall I go into apologetics?

Student: No, I just wanted to know. I would assume that there would be a reason why you have shifted the treatment.

LS: Oh, that is very simple, because in the historical development of it—the book dealt with natural right. Now in the famous history of natural right in the nineteenth century, the alternative, so to say, from the very beginning was history more than anything else. The historical school, which started in Germany and which spread then also to other countries—in England the most famous representative was Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law*, 1861. A very interesting book. And this opposition to natural law rested on "history" and not on any fact–value distinction. The predecessors of the present-day positivists were at that time still very dogmatic utilitarians and did never consider the utilitarian position as something which belongs to a period, to a given period or culture, and will vanish with the disappearance of that epoch or culture. That was the reason. Yes, Rabbi Weiss?

Rabbi Weiss: Why does philosophy today have to examine the genesis of opinions, in contradistinction to the Socratic approach which would just examine the opinions as such?

LS: That is a very good and important question. In other words, what appears to us who have any experience in these matters to be absolutely necessary, to engage in historical studies, in what is so very badly called history of ideas, as a philosophically, essentially necessary thing, must indeed be held back by the observation that no such necessity was felt until a few generations ago. I have read statements to this effect: historical study is of course essentially necessary, philosophically relevant. It is simply self-knowledge. And the argument which I have sketched is of course self-knowledge. I want to understand my opinion. But no one in former times understood by self-knowledge anything which had even remotely to do with historical studies. That is your point. Why is it so obviously evident to us, and why was it so wholly unevident until, say, a hundred and fifty years ago? I would suggest this answer: that our concepts, modern concepts, cannot be clarified without historical analysis, whereas the earlier concepts could. That is a mere dogmatic assertion for the time being but formally answers your question in a classic way by making a distinction. What does this mean? I will indicate it. When we speak today of the state, it is no longer quite so common [to use the term "state"] except in international law, I believe, but still in a federal republic like the United States you will speak of states in the sense of state government. I know that, but still it is no longer such a central term of political science as it was fifty years ago. What is the state? That comes from Latin word *status* . . . and is of course wholly unintelligible in itself because it means the state: the state of heat, the state of my health, and things of this kind. Something has been suppressed. *Status rei publicae*, the state of the commonwealth. That you can say is absolutely trivial, but the mere word history[xix] in itself certainly would not be interesting, but if you go somewhat deeper—we have to do this in this very course—you see something obvious which is to begin with completely hidden. And that can only be done with historical studies, not necessarily of state papers and archives, they are the least interesting examples, but of the great political thinkers.

Now let us look at Aristotle. Aristotle speaks of something which he calls not the state but the *polis*, the city. There is not a trace of an attempt to understand the genesis of the concept *polis*, because a *polis*, you just know what it is. *Polis* as a concept is not derivative in the way in which "state" is derivative. Let us take another example. You can say: Well, all right, when Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Commentary on*[18] [*Aristotle's*] *Politics*,[xx] there was no *polis* proper around. There were certain[19] [communities] in Italy in that time, but they certainly didn't play the role which Athens and Sparta played in Plato's or Aristotle's time. There was the Holy Roman Empire, and the kingdoms of France and of England and such things, and there were some . . . cities there, but they were rather enclaves than the dominating things. And yet Thomas Aquinas—his commentary goes only into the second book or early third book and doesn't go through the whole, but there is no question that Thomas understood Aristotle's *Politics* infinitely better than anyone today. Anyone who claims to understand Aristotle's *Politics* does it only to the extent to which he has learned from Thomas. He may have to learn more than Thomas, but that is another question. How come? How come[20] Thomas didn't need an historical study of the concept of *polis*? He barely knew Greek, as you know. In a strict

[xix] That is, history of the word "state."
[xx] Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's* Politics, trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007).

sense he didn't know Greek, and yet he understood what no classical scholar today understands except if he makes a very special effort, which is very rare. How come? Because the origin of *polis* or city as a concept was present to him. To study political theory or political philosophy meant to study Aristotle's *Politics*. Well, today there is no longer a political philosophy in existence, perhaps, but a few years ago, to study political theory[21] was to study Bosanquet[xxi] or some other men who had of course studied Plato and Aristotle. But Bosanquet, that was political theory. Aristotle was an old master whose teaching was of course overcome a long time ago. We are in need of history—of intellectual history, as you can put it—because our concepts, the origins of our concepts are not contemporary with us. To be contemporary here doesn't mean that you have to have lived in Aristotle's age. Thomas Aquinas didn't live in Aristotle's age, but he was contemporary with Aristotle because in these matters Aristotle was as present as an up-to-date textbook in calculus is present to the present-day, the modern student of calculus. Is this a bit clearer now?

Student: Weren't there terms which, say, Socrates tries to examine, of which there were a multiplicity and which were not clear—

LS: No concept is clear. These are always very difficult things. But the point is, he[xxii] did not have to go back to a past. All these meanings—when you have a Platonic dialogue, all these different opinions about courage, justice, or whatever it may be, are all present now. I mean they are valid, accepted. I mean, they[xxiii] don't say: Let us see what the Homeric concept of justice is and how it was changed through the lyric poets and the tragic poets until it became the average Athenian notion—well, as a modern historian would see it. Nothing of this, not even a trace of it. There is a very beautiful remark by Hegel in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Mind*,[xxiv] in which he stated in a way in which I could not possibly state it—but I quoted it in a book recently, in my essay "Political Philosophy and History."[xxv] I forgot it, but I will try to reconstruct it. Hegel says [that] in ancient times philosophy was not "systematic," and he is thinking of Platonic dialogues and similar things. Thinking starts at every point. Everywhere there are interesting questions, everywhere there are (darknesses?),[xxvi] and thinking just turns to whatever occurs to it. Out of this effort there emerged, through the work of many generations, concepts proper, philosophic concepts as distinguished from the, how shall I say it, commonsensical concepts. This was the net result of the effort of the greatest thinkers of classical antiquity, especially Plato and Aristotle. In modern times, Hegel says, we find the concepts already available, a finished product is transmitted—[xxvii]

[xxi] Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923), English philosopher, author of *Philosophical Theory of the State* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1899).
[xxii] That is, Thomas.
[xxiii] That is, the interlocutors in a Platonic dialogue.
[xxiv] Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807).
[xxv] Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," in *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).
[xxvi] "(darknesses?)" appears in the original transcript, evidently a guess of the transcriber.
[xxvii] The tape was changed at this point.

—what you do not get is the fundamental experiences which were underlying the development of these concepts. And if we want to understand what city means, or what virtue means, or any of these key words, it is not sufficient to leave it at what is handed down in textbooks, say, around 1600, but we have to repeat the process of original acquisition that took place, say, in Plato, and in some other discussions. I cannot develop this more now.

Student: Would you elaborate a little, please, on the consequences as far as historicists are concerned of this view that the premises are imposed by fate? What are the consequences of that view? The consequence, for example, is not that the history of the past is unknowable, is it?

LS: Is unknowable? No, except in this sense: that objective knowledge, you know, knowledge which is identically the same for everyone regardless of difference of epoch or culture, is impossible. But what you hear today in every journalistic utterance, that the Shakespeare of 1960 is entirely different from the Shakespeare of 1900, they interpret Shakespeare differently—that applies to everything, with the understanding that you cannot say that our Shakespeare, as he is now on the average understood, implies a deeper or better understanding of Shakespeare than that which, say, Dr. Johnson[xxviii] or Garrick[xxix] had. Is this view not very familiar to you? I think that is a very powerful element of our world. Whether it is reasonable or unreasonable, that is another question, but first I would like only to help you in recognizing it, in diagnosing it as what it is.

Student: Isn't there one historicist, I believe that you have in mind, exactly one who has tried to reconstruct what the Greeks . . .

LS: Corrections of what?

Student: I would say Aristotle.

LS: That is as such not historicism. This could simply be a relic of a prehistoricist position which,[22] [as] is unfortunately true of all relics, is not sufficiently aware of the difficulties which have led to historicism. Surely there are people today who would take an old-fashioned, simple view. I believe that is the view in St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, as well as in the Great Books courses all over the country. You read Aristotle's *Politics*, or whatever it may be, and you say: Here that's wrong, there's a contradiction, here there are facts which Aristotle didn't know,[23] [this] has been refuted. That is healthy and all right, but it is not sufficient. Perhaps it will become clearer when we turn to the specific arguments of Collingwood. First I only wanted you[24] to see that [t]here is a very powerful agent which affects to different degrees all of us and which we must learn to face. I say this in order to see [that if] that's true, we have to accept it, or if it is wrong, to liberate ourselves from it. But a simple disregard is not possible. And of

[xxviii] Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English man of letters who published a highly influential annotated edition of Shakespeare's works, *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (London, 1756).
[xxix] David Garrick (1717-1779), English actor, playwright, and producer.

course the term "historicism" is used as all such terms in seventy-five or eighty-nine different meanings. I have tried to define it in a sensible way.

Student: Well, you were referring to Heidegger, weren't you?

LS: Then I would like to hear again your statement, because I thought of a much cruder position.

Student: Well, my question had to do with the import of the claim that the premises are imposed by fate, and what is the import of that? We have a statement, what are the implications of that? The implication of Heidegger is certainly not that we cannot understand the ancients.

LS: Heidegger's statements about this are a bit cagy, and let me try to get out a precise formula. The old view, and the view which these people have, for example who believe they can judge the real Aristotle and criticize him . . . as Hegel would say, meaning without having equipped themselves properly. The view of these people, and of much better people, is that it is possible to understand a thinker better than he understood himself. If you see that in a matter of any consequence Aristotle is wrong, you understand [Aristotle] in this matter[25] better than he understood himself. Now this formula became famous through Kant. It was older than Kant, and Kant applied it to his interpretation of Plato's doctrine of ideas. He reintroduced the term "idea" in a sense totally different from Descartes, Locke, [and] Hume's notion of idea, and he said that he is recovering something which these modern people had forgotten which Plato had in mind, and which was of course not Plato's understanding of ideas. But he said one can understand a great man better than he understood himself. What he did not say, out of a deep modesty, was you have to be someone like Kant to do this. Heidegger always rejected this possibility of understanding a thinker better than he understood himself. Now the ordinary historian—I mean, I am speaking of the better type, of course, but the one who is not a "genius"—tries to understand a thinker exactly as that thinker understood himself. That, we can say, is the goal of the old-fashioned objective historian, just as Ranke[xxx] said: I want to know precisely how things happened. The intellectual historian says: I would like to know precisely what Plato thought. Regarding this, Heidegger says: That is impossible, because you necessarily understand him differently. That is Heidegger's answer to the question. It is impossible to understand exactly, as it is impossible to understand better than—I mean, in interesting cases. Some professor around 1890, to understand him better than he understood himself, that's easy; but in the interesting cases it is impossible to understand "better than," it is impossible to understand "exactly as." The only thing that it is possible to do is to understand "differently from." That is Heidegger's official teaching.

I believe it is impossible, if I may mention this in passing, for the following reason. Within certain limits, that makes sense. For example, Heidegger surely would perhaps say—I don't know, I've never spoken to him about it—Heidegger would say [that] truly to understand what Plato meant by "opinion," a term which occurs all the time, is perhaps impossible. It is impossible for me, for example, but that is not the interesting point. For

[xxx] Historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886).

what I called fate, a term which I have from time to time used, Heidegger has another term of broader import. That he calls in the German word *sein*, used as an infinitive, in English *to be*, in Latin *esse*, in French *être*. It is a hard thing in English. Heidegger's thesis is that the origin—excuse me, this is a very crude formula—the highest possible theme with a view to which everything must be ultimately understood, if it is to be understood, is *to be*, whatever that may mean. And this *to be* is as it were the source of the variety of categories used by men in different epochs and in different cultures. *To be* reveals itself differently in different epochs. That is, up to this point, straight relativism. Now Heidegger says, however, that while "to be" has revealed itself in a way in the earliest Greek thought, it was so to speak from the very beginning misunderstood. To be was identified somehow with being, *esse* as *ens*, *être* with [*étant*], or however you might express it, and he calls this characteristic of Western thought the oblivion of to be—in German, *Seinsvergessenheit*. That is in a way the core of Heidegger's judgment of the whole Western tradition. That means, of course, whatever Heidegger may say, that in the decisive respect he understands all thinkers of the past better than they understood themselves because they were unaware of the fundamental theme. And whether they understood better certain derivative things which Heidegger again will not understand is uninteresting. But I always find that Heidegger's hesitation and his asserting that we can never understand more than "differently than" was a clear sign of the fundamental difficulties of historicism, even in this most sophisticated form it has hitherto found, and that is Heidegger. Mr. [Fackenheim] has a few points which don't go deep enough in my opinion, but it is informative and could give those of you who know nothing of it some introduction. Did I make myself clear now?

Student: If one were to follow what I think you meant in your answer to the other question, that we must go back to the origins of concepts and we are doomed to do so, but if one were to follow this, [doesn't this ultimately follow from][26] the thesis, the fact that since Aquinas we can't read anybody without going into a historical process to understand his thought?

LS: I don't know quite what you meant by that, but let us assume that were so. What would be the difficulties?

Student: The point is that you can't simply read a thinker and understand him without trying to engage in a study of the meaning of the terms.

LS: That you have to do anyway. I mean, if you read a Platonic text, when the word "table" occurs, or "a man," you have no difficulties. You all know what a table is, although a Greek table might be different from our table. If you are interested in this trivial thing, you can look up in a dictionary of antiquity [to see] how Greek tables looked, but usually it is of no interest. And if we speak simply of men and women in the *Republic*, I suppose we know what that is; that in itself doesn't call for anything. But when Plato speaks of "idea," how can you do that? Of course the first thing to do, naturally, is to collect all, everything Plato says about ideas and try to make head and tail of it. But I didn't say that in order to understand Plato and Aristotle it is absolutely necessary to go back to their origins . . . But if you study, for example, Descartes or

Locke, of course you have to do that all the time. Moreover, Hobbes and Locke, in spite of all their silences about their predecessors, point you to their predecessors more often than one would think. Hobbes was extremely [chaste?][xxxi] in his method, you know. Everyone before him taught more or less nonsense, and he wound up with all the credit, if you call that [chaste?].[xxxii] But he surely makes a clean sweep. But even he forces you to look at Aristotle and Cicero and such people because he makes it clear that they are the fellows whom he attacks.

Student: I'll agree with you there, but you mentioned Descartes, who in a very real sense doesn't hark back to his predecessors. What would you do, then, if you were introduced to a section on, say, ideal or value? Would you trace back to the thought of his century and perhaps beyond his century?

LS: Not in principle, but these things appear very soon in practice. Descartes speaks of ideas, and so much so that Locke called him the discoverer, or something like that, of the way of ideas. Descartes knew that when he used the word "idea" he meant something very different[27] [from] what every predecessor meant by the word "idea." He never said so; that does not make [it] less important but more important that you should see this [difference]. You must always use your heads. Even if Descartes never says, should never have said that he effects a radical change, he might have effected a radical change, and being a cautious man, not acting like Thomas Hobbes, not trumpeting it, but doing it on the sly. But how can you find that out if you don't know what happened before? In practice, what will you do? Let us talk like sensible men. I believe you will begin to read probably with the *Discourse on Method*. There are difficulties there, you will find very soon, and so you will of course use a commentary or essays. The most well-known commentary now is Gilson's commentary.[xxxiii] You have to read French, of course. And you read Gilson, and then you will find a long note by Gilson in which he will tell you that in the whole Christian tradition, disregarding what occurs in Plato, the term "idea" was used only of the content of the divine mind. Descartes is the first to apply it to the content of the human mind. That is not a slight difference. In addition, you have also to read[28] of course the *Meditations*,[29] [and Descartes's reply to the objections].[xxxiv] You know Descartes sent[30] [the *Meditations*] to acquaintances who made objections, and he replied to the objections. You have to read them, and then you see these fellows, who were very learned men (some of them, at any rate), told him that there were large parts of Descartes which remind them of Augustine, and Descartes is very mealy-mouthed, and they bring that out. And if you are a curious man, you will want to form a judgment for yourself. Then you will read Augustine and see. Inevitable. In the practice of study, these things come to sight immediately. We are now concerned only with the broad theoretical problem here.

[xxxi] The word in brackets is as it appears in the original transcript.
[xxxii] The word in brackets is as it appears in the original transcript.
[xxxiii] Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode, Texte et commentaire par Étienne Gilson* (Paris, 1947).
[xxxiv] Descartes's *Meditations on first philosophy* was published in 1641. See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method; and, Meditations on first philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998).

Student: In theory as well as in practice it comes to mean that we cannot understand one man or his work without understanding what preceded him.

LS: I think the case is truly different when you compare, say, Plato and Aristotle on the one hand, and the modern philosophers on the other hand. It is different. Of course Plato was preceded by the so-called pre-Socratics, of whom we have only fragments and reports, and this creates a special technical difficulty. How can you study fragments, properly speaking? Surely, but even if the complete writings were available, I think the situation would be very different, say, between Plato and Aristotle on the one hand and, say, Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel on the other. Yes?

Student: It seems that there was a contradiction in the historicist's position. He says that he constructs a metaphysical principle which purports to be universal, i.e., that all thought is conditioned by its time, and he claims that there can be no universal elements. That seems to be a contradiction. He should say he doesn't know anything about it at all.

LS: That would make it in a way useless, if he would admit this. But, true, that is a difficulty which I regard as very serious. There are some people who say that merely logical difficulties don't mean anything. I think they mean a lot, and I take it very seriously, in other words, that the thesis "all human thought is historical" in the sense defined is transhistorical. I think this is a very serious difficulty. And Heidegger, who of course is fully aware of that, tried to solve it by his *sein*.[31] [It] is very difficult to understand what he means by that, but we can easily see its function: it is that which is the ground of all history and yet which is knowable, accessible only in a historically specific fashion. Is this possible? There must be something which [is] in a sense which is transhistoric[al]. That cannot be avoided. But could not that transhistorical *x* be of such a character that it shows itself in radically different ways in different cultures and in different epochs? Would not this take care of the formal logical difficulty?

Student: It seems that they're making a judgment beforehand rather than constructing it afterwards. It seems to me it's not contradicted by the fact there are universal principles in every society which are advanced, as a certain technology, a certain government, and what not—

LS: It's not so simple. That is a great seduction of positivism, that it applies its fabricated concepts, which have an immediate plausibility on the basis of our Western experience, to other cultures. That is not so simple. When we speak of—you say technology, let us say "art"; and that ultimately goes back to the Greek word *techne*, from which "technology" is derived. To what extent can you do that in interpreting things belonging to other cultures? That is not so simple. You only have to[32] try to identify—I mean, the only other culture of which I know something with my own eyes is the Old Testament. It is already hard[33] to find [in Old Testament Hebrew] a word which really covers what the Greeks meant by *techne* and what we mean today by technology. But take other things of much broader interest. I mean, there are certain things which you will find everywhere, I believe—I don't know, I believe. I am sure in every human language there will be made a distinction between male and female, for the simple reason that everywhere where there

are humans there are male and female humans, and it is very important[34] that we find words for it. And there will also be words for the various species of animals, with the famous differences.[35] I believe I have been told there are a hundred Arabic words for the various stages in the life of a camel; and also where lions are important, there are many names for stages of growth of a lion. But that is not very interesting, because you have the same thing in specialized groups in the Western world, hunters and such people, or animal breeders.

The interesting things are the broad terms, and then one makes the most amazing discoveries once one just uses one's head. For example, I mentioned before, there is no Old Testament expression for "history" although there are so many people who write and say that the Old Testament is the classic document of the discovery of history. I would say that cannot be true, because people find invariably the right word for what they have discovered if it is of any importance.[36] [Take] another word: world. Try to say "world" in biblical Hebrew. I don't believe it's possible. I think the biblical equivalent is heaven and earth and what is between them. I would assume that in every human language you must have a word for heaven. You see that and the earth, but that you should bring together[37] [both] into a unity of the world—even in Greek, the Greek word *cosmos* is relatively late, sixth century, seventh century. And these are very important things. There is not even a Hebrew word for air. The traditional Hebrew word for air is the Greek word *aār* Hebraicized. Air had to be discovered. Air was not so manifest as dogs, camels, trees, males, females. That is not so simple. And that is the reason I don't believe a word, if I may say so, of what we are told by the anthropologists. I mean, it may be sufficient for foreign aid and for such practical purposes, that is probably true, but for an understanding these people are much too unreflective about the really derivative character and the very peculiar character of our concepts. And I would assume that you would find probably everywhere—I do not know—[a word] equivalent to what we call "law" in a wider sense, without making distinctions between customary and written law, to say nothing of ordinary and constitutional law. There are always rules, something like rules with which we are supposed to comply. But when law is applied, our law, we imply a distinction between law and custom and mores and what have you. And [to] apply it to a culture—that's also one of these terribly dangerous words—to a culture which doesn't know of these distinctions?

Here is a story. I'll try to make [up] these experiences myself. Lacking funds, I could never do it in deed. Let us take the case of a very simple tribe with a language of an entirely different kind than the language with which you are familiar, and the manners wholly different, extremely different in every respect, and you go there and you want to study them. You changed the tribe by your presence. They would understand if someone comes there because he has committed murder, perhaps, and had to flee, or because he wants to cheat them, trade with them, or was shipwrecked. But if someone should come there only for the purpose to understand them, in the moment that the brightest chieftain among them understands that, he is already a changed man. That is the anthropological parallel to the famous difficulty in quantum physics, that the observer changes . . . I think that the utmost thoughtfulness and reflectiveness is required to do these things properly. And I think when you have a conversation with someone who belongs to a different

culture and is not eager just to show how close it is to the West—I have seen this very often, in the case of the Chinese, for example, who tried to sell the notion that there is no serious difference between Confucius and Thomas Jefferson—well, I really wouldn't believe that for one moment. I mean, if you talk to someone who is also really theoretically interested and you can cross-examine him and he can cross-examine you, then you learn and then you see the enormous difficulties. I would say that pragmatically speaking, the truth of historicism, the relative truth, consists in the fact that the differences between human beings in historical terms, in terms of cultures and epochs, are truly very, very profound. I don't think you have to be an historicist to know that, but it was not always sufficiently appreciated by the philosophic tradition, that is perfectly true, and one should take this very seriously.

Student: Well, admitting the uniqueness of certain distinctions in, say, the Eskimo language, the fact that certain concepts are historically conditioned, but it's quite a jump from saying that concepts like justice are historically conditioned to saying that they are nothing but the products of historical distinction. That is the jump which everyone naturally takes when they find out that something is historically conditioned. You must admit even logically that despite variations in certain concepts in certain cultures, logically there will be similarities, too.

LS: Collingwood discusses that at some length, and I believe in spite of my good intentions to stop my introductory presentation today I will have to speak about Collingwood's version of historicism next time. Granting that something like justice or right—"right" I believe is one of our more elementary terms; in Greek *dikē*, from which the Greek word for justice was derived—something of this kind I suppose you find everywhere, because men are capable to deviate from that, from whatever is regarded as right and therefore it becomes a theme everywhere, I believe. And therefore there must be something in common wherever and whenever humans speak of right. The question is: Can you express it with any definiteness without already modifying this thing common to all men? In other words, if you go beyond such a general expression as what you are expected to do, which you know is very difficult because you are expected also to have good manners, which has nothing to do with right, but in certain stages the distinction between law and manners is not as pronounced as it is with us. In other words, what you get is something extremely formal and empty. What is the use of that? Differently stated, will not your formula of the most abstract [thing] common to all cultures and epochs not reflect your standpoint, the epoch and the culture to which you belong? That is, I think, the kind of thing they would say.

And as was implied in the previous remark, I believe that by far the most important form which historicism has taken is the one which it has in Heidegger, and is it a simple matter of fact that Heidegger is the most powerful thinker in our age and so this alone forces one to take the matter very seriously. That is of course out of the question in this course, where, after all, we want to speak about Aristotle, and I have only to indicate the obstacles we have to overcome if we want to understand Aristotle. Since Collingwood is, as far as I know, by far the most articulate English-speaking thinker who is a historicist, I would like to read to you a few passages from Collingwood next time and discuss them.

Collingwood's point is exactly this. The ordinary schools of philosophy in his time asserted that there are things which they called permanent problems, i.e., say, the number of problems epistemological, ethical, political, aesthetic, and so on. These are the problems of philosophy, and every interesting or self-respecting thinker of any time or place has of course dealt with these problems. Now he says that is nonsense, and in this I entirely agree with him. I saw a book title not long ago, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*.[xxxv] I haven't read it, but it is in itself impossible, because I happen to know what aesthetics is meant to be and what its presuppositions are, and these presuppositions are not fulfilled before the eighteenth century. Of course there was always a doctrine of poetry which could be a kind of doctrine of all imitative art, music, painting, and so on, and then the doctrine of the beautiful. These are two entirely different and so to speak wholly unconnected things, because until the end of the eighteenth century the prevalent view was that the beautiful *par excellence* is the naturally beautiful (not to go into questions of theology): in other words, the beauty of the human body which is only imitated by sculpture. That beauty should come to be reduced to the beauty in art is a fantastic change of orientation, and that is somehow implied in our concept of aesthetics, although in the meantime there has come into being an aesthetics of the ugly, so that it is no longer defined in terms of the beautiful as it originally was. In this point I think that Collingwood is simply factually correct. And even epistemology: surely the question "What is knowledge?" is obviously relevant for Plato and Aristotle, but what it came to mean especially in the nineteenth century, whether there was such a thing in classical antiquity is very doubtful. And [it is the same for] many other things, and I think that is even essential if we want to understand Aristotle, [to see] that [the assertion that] nothing fundamental has changed in the opinions regarding the most general and fundamental things would be a factually wrong assertion. It could still be true, and I believe it is, that we are still human beings as human beings are at any time and in any culture, and that this includes the possibility that we can understand, if we make the necessary effort, human beings belonging to other times and to other cultures. But the effort may have to be in certain cases very, very great; and that the leading opinions which mold us from childhood are radically different in our age, in this country, from those five hundred years ago in Spain or Iraq, and of course in classical antiquity,[38] is undeniable. And if you simply make simplistic equations, you never understand these other people. That is a strong point of historicism which doesn't make it philosophically tenable but which shows its relative superiority to other schools which are in existence and which are more or less blind to the importance of these differences.

Student: Even the multiplicity, and taking your view, the separateness of the different concepts of justice doesn't preclude a rational evaluation of them. Now—

LS: Oh, no, surely not. The question is still, before you can make a judgment on an opinion of justice, any opinion, contemporary or past, Western or Eastern, you have to have . . . to understand it, of course . . . But this kind of historicism can under certain given conditions be helpful for making us see things which an ordinary erroneous

---

[xxxv] Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Originally published in 1956 as *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino*.

teaching conceals from our sight. That is possible, isn't it? One can take a rather cynical view and can say that the schools which are powerful at any time are always characterized by a certain massive blindness, and that generally speaking one kind of blindness is replaced by another kind of blindness. You know there were once liberals in control—that means in present-day American language—and now the conservatives arrive. Well, in many cases one would simply say that one very narrow view has been replaced by the opposite narrow view, and a sensible man would not have been a liberal in that sense in 1933, nor will he be a conservative in that sense in 1961. And that happens in different ways in different times. Historicism has a relative merit by reminding us of those very great differences in opinions, of the very profound differences of opinion which are possible among humans and which make it only all the more necessary to see how a possible agreement, a rational agreement, can be reached. And on that note we will conclude today.

---

[1] Deleted "that thing which is primary to law."
[2] Deleted "now."
[3] Deleted "see."
[4] Deleted "That is only an external, but I believe important designation of the problem. That."
[5] Deleted "the"
[6] Deleted "was."
[7] Deleted "with."
[8] Deleted "that didn't make any."
[9] Deleted "(Interruption) I am terribly sorry but the person in room assignments assigned this room for 4:00 for a public lecture, so would it be possible for you to move back up to room— LS: Impossible. You see only 48 people can be seated in [room] 305, and I am not a good counter, but I believe there are definitely more than 48. Stranger: And this lecture will go on until 4:30? LS: Oh no, beyond that. The minimum time is 5:00. Usually we stay after. I mean, I have the greatest sympathies for the troubles of the room office, but I cannot help you there. You tell them that it is simply impossible, and there are so many rooms. Stranger: Okay."
[10] Deleted "and."
[11] Deleted "But."
[12] Deleted "LS: Will you kindly close the door? Stranger: Excuse me, Mr. Strauss, the room assignments people have made a bobble, as usual. But we have a public lecture scheduled for this hour here, and according to the room assignments lady we have this room, and I must simply ask your class to move, I am afraid. LS: In other words, you have the right on your side? Stranger: Yes, we do. LS: Then we have to bow. We are lawabiding people. Stranger: She offered you— LS: But I can only say you have the power on your side— Stranger: Rosenwald 2— LS: And we have the right— Stranger: I am very sorry, there is a big crowd out there, and the hour is now. LS: Well, let me see. I try to be a democrat about it. Is the class willing to bow to sheer power? They seem to with. Rosenwald 2? Stranger: Rosenwald 2. LS: Does any of you know where Rosenwald 2 is? All right. Lead us, let's go."
[13] Deleted "that is."
[14] Deleted "became of each individual"
[15] Deleted "vis-à-vis."
[16] Deleted "necessarily belongs"
[17] Deleted "you will."
[18] Deleted "the."
[19] Deleted "things."
[20] Deleted "that."
[21] Deleted "a few years ago."
[22] Deleted "what."
[23] Deleted "it."
[24] Deleted "not more than."
[25] Moved "Aristotle"

[26] Deleted “isn’t there the ultimate following”
[27] Deleted “with.”
[28] Deleted “I believe, I forgot those things now, you have to read of course also.”
[29] Deleted “where objections you know.”
[30] Deleted “them.”
[31] Deleted “which.”
[32] Deleted “do that”
[33] Deleted “to say in Old Testament Hebrew”
[34] Deleted “so”
[35] Deleted “that.”
[36] Deleted “But.”
[37] Deleted “this.”
[38] Deleted “that.”

Session 7: October 23, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: [in progress] —but I think it is safe to say that thinking is meant to issue in the greatest possible clarity about the subject of thought. Now the greatest clarity would require at least a clear beginning, and we must surely begin at the beginning, yet we are always in the midst of things. Accordingly, Aristotle—and by implication, Plato—made a distinction between two kinds of beginnings. [First], what is the beginning in itself? That is to become clear to us only at the end. And [second], what is the beginning for us? The beginning can only mean, in practical way, what is the beginning for us. If we look once more at positivism, in a way positivism says that the beginning, the right beginnings are the sense data. The pure sense data are not yet organized by concepts. But this cannot be true, because we never begin at sense data. We come across pure sense data, mere sounds, mere colors and so, only through a special effort, through a particular process of abstraction. Before we become aware of sense data we become aware of things: chairs, for example. But of the things there is an infinite variety, and where is a proper beginning there? Therefore people have said in more recent times the things are known to us by virtue of being named. The beginning is language, and language in contradistinction to the things is something like a system and not a mere chaos or infinite variety of things. But again we must note that language is never the first for us. We use language all the time, but it does not become a theme for us primarily, and the simple proof of this is the original name of the science of language. That science was traditionally called, and I believe it is still called grammar. "Grammar" is the English translation of the Greek word *grammatike*, which means the knowledge of letters. So it is very interesting that only in a literate society, and in a very high development of a literate society, namely, of Greek society, did men begin to think[1] about language.

That is not the primary theme. What then is primary and at the same time orderly, so that it can give us an orientation? One can say these primary things are the opinions. We all live [with and] grow into opinions and develop them in various ways, and these opinions have an order. There is a hierarchy of opinions. There are opinions about the highest things or the most authoritative opinions; they exist at all times in every society. There is no reason to assume that these authoritative opinions are permanent, meaning always the same in all times and in all places. One can even say they are obviously impermanent. In our time and place, one could say at first glance that the most authoritative opinion is that supporting liberal democracy, or what one may call, taking into account certain trends of thought in this country, permissive egalitarianism. But this cannot be right, because we are told everywhere that this is mere opinion, i.e., not knowledge or science. I say "everywhere" meaning in the social sciences; whatever we may regard as authoritative in our quality as citizens, in the moment we enter the halls of social science (by which I do not necessarily mean of this particular building),[ii] we are told that is not the most authoritative opinion because it is mere opinion. The most authoritative opinion must be

[i] See Strauss, "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *Review of Metaphysics* 5 (1952): 559-86.

[ii] This class, like most of Strauss's classes, met in the Social Science building.

examined. The truly authoritative opinion is not liberal democracy or the opinion supporting liberal democracy but science, the belief in science. This is no longer challenged, generally speaking, and therefore it is in need of special examination.

But both the need for such an examination and the possibility of it arises from the fact that that opinion is contested [even] without our doing anything about it. Before we so to say open our mouths or begin to think, we see already how this opinion in favor of science called positivism is contested by another opinion. There is then, and that again is in itself something permanent, a conflict of authoritative opinions. Positivism is contested in the first place by older views, especially by religious faith, which by its own definition is not mere opinion but faith; but on the other hand, it is clear that faith is not science. And secondly, it is contested by historicism, which begins where positivism stops. Now historicism too must be examined, as every authoritative opinion must be examined. If both positivism and historicism should prove to be fundamentally inadequate, we would have to seek for something better. Prior to examination, every opinion, every position is a possibility. The mere fact that a given opinion is no longer held widely—is perhaps not held by a single individual now living—does not yet prove that it is not a worthwhile opinion. Prior to examination, we must regard it as possible that old Thales, traditionally regarded as the first philosopher, may be in the right. It is equally possible also that all doctrines which have hitherto appeared are fundamentally inadequate, and then we must seek for something entirely new. These very simple and plain reflections are a very poor summary of what takes place in every Platonic dialogue on an infinitely more developed level.

On the basis of this general introduction I would now like to turn to my subject of last time, historicism, with special regard to Collingwood's *Autobiography*. I take the *Autobiography* rather than *The Idea of History* because it is a briefer book and a clearer book. Now what is Collingwood about? I read to you page 77. "My life's work hitherto, as seen from my fiftieth year, has been in the main an attempt to bring about a *rapprochement* [a coming together—LS] between philosophy and history."[iii] That is the point. Historicism regards the fusion of philosophy and history as essential. Of course Collingwood has to proceed in an autobiographic way, but that is of more than autobiographic interest because the presuppositions of his historicism come out in his criticism of the then-prevailing opinion in Britain. Now the philosophy which prevailed at that time in England according to Collingwood is a school which called itself realism. If I may be permitted to say something about something of which I know nothing first hand, from Collingwood's presentation it appears to be a decayed version of philosophy in the old sense. But the trouble is, it was a decayed version and therefore unable to resist the onslaught of Collingwood. Now Collingwood refutes the main thesis of this so-called realism in the following way. [He takes] the central positive doctrine of these realists. The most famous[2] [realist discussed in the book] is Cook Wilson,[iv] a scholar who is regarded with high respect by students of Plato. Cook Wilson's central positive doctrine

[iii] R. G. Collingwood, *Autobiography* (1939), 77.

[iv] John Cook Wilson (1849-1895), Wykeham Professor of Logic at New College, Oxford and founder of "Oxford Realism." Author of the influential *On the Interpretation of Plato's* Timaeus (1889).

was: knowing makes no difference to what is known. The implication is this. There is a doctrine called "idealism" which means knowing does make a difference to what is known. The object of knowledge is the product of knowing. We can say this was the idealistic assertion, and the realist assertion was that this process of knowing does not make any difference to what is known.

"I argued that anyone who claimed, as Cook Wilson did, to be sure of this, was in effect claiming to know what he was simultaneously defining as unknown. For if you know that no difference is made to a thing *theta* by the presence or absence of a certain condition *c*, you know what *theta* is like with *c*, and also what *theta* is like without *c*, and on comparing the two find no difference. This involves knowing what *theta* is like without *c*; or,[v] in the present case, knowing what you defined as the unknown."[vi]

That is the refutation, and I don't know whether you have been able to follow it. I had to read it fast. Knowledge means to see, to apprehend, what is in itself regardless: it is in itself whether we know it or not. Let us call a thing X. X is either known, then it is Xo, or it is unknown, Xu. In order to say that X is not affected by knowledge, you have to know X in both conditions, when it is known and when it is unknown. But that is impossible: you cannot know a thing which you do not know. The argument is absolutely convincing so far as it goes. So this settled the issue of realism with Collingwood.

Now I would like to say a word about what the true issue is if we go beyond this somewhat formalistic discussion, which may have been perfectly adequate so far as these realists were concerned—I cannot judge of that. The true issue concerns a discipline which was of the utmost importance, and still is, for modern thought, called epistemology or theory of knowledge. Now an epistemology or theory of knowledge is an account of how knowledge of things is possible. This means however that every theory of knowledge presupposes knowledge of things. Every theory of knowledge tries to show how it is possible. It presupposes its possibility as an experience. Now every such epistemology is less certain or evident than our knowledge of the things. This, we can say, was the old-fashioned view; therefore an epistemology or theory of knowledge was not of central importance for premodern philosophy. In application to our preoccupation within social sciences in particular, it may be helpful to make this distinction. You always hear the term "empirical," but empirical was always something innocent and doesn't create any special problem in itself. If I say it is now 3:45 and we are in Room 122, I make an empirical statement. Everyone can easily check on it and so on. But in the moment, on the basis of very abstruse considerations someone says: How do we really know it, what do we strictly speaking see?—then you arrive at a special theory of knowledge according to which, for example, the sense data are the only things which are really impressed upon you. And everything else—for example, that we are human beings, that we are sitting in rows and so on—is somehow interpretation, the application of some construct to the sense data. Now I think one should call this particular view of empirical knowledge not empirical but "empiricist." Empiricism is a certain form of epistemology or theory of knowledge which may be true or may be false, but it is surely not the same as

[v] "Or" does not appear in the original.
[vi] *Autobiography*, 44. In the original, "theta" is the Greek letter.

empirical. And when you hear in many places in this building the demand that political science must be empirical, one should tell them they misuse the word: political science always was empirical. But one should say: You mean it should be empiricist. That is of course a very long story which has very much to do with British empiricism, as it is called, meaning Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and I cannot go into that.

I return to the English realists in the first half of the twentieth century and to Collingwood. After having disposed of their [positivist] principles, he turned to the moral philosophy of the realists, and this moral philosophy according to Collingwood culminated in the extrusion of ethics from the body of philosophy. And he mentions here the name of a man who is very well known now, Bertrand Russell.[vii] But Bertrand Russell seems to be the most extreme representative. Now what does this mean? The realist said to his pupils: If it interests you to study this, do so, but don't think it will be of any use to you.

Remember the great principle of realism, that nothing is affected by being known. That is as true of human actions as of anything else. Moral philosophy is only the theory of moral action. It can't therefore make any difference to the practice of moral action.

"The pupils, whether or not they expected a philosophy that would[viii] give them, as that of Green's school [Green was an old-fashioned idealist—LS] had given their fathers, ideals to live for and principles to live by, did not get it; and were told that no philosopher (except of course a bogus philosopher) would even try to give it. The inference which any pupil could draw for himself was that for guidance in the problems of life, since one must not seek it from thinkers or from thinking, from ideals or from principles, one must look to people who were not thinkers (but fools), to processes that were not thinking (but passion), to ends[ix] that were not ideals (but caprices), and to rules that were not principles (but expediency[x]). If the realists had wanted to train up a generation of Englishmen and Englishwomen expressly as the potential dupes of every adventurer in morals or politics, commerce or religion, who should appeal to their emotions[3] [and] promise of private gain which he could neither deliver[xi] nor even meant to procure them, no better way of doing it could have been discovered."[xii]

Another victim of realism according to Collingwood was political theory. This they destroyed by denying the conception of a common good, the fundamental idea of all social life, and insisting that all goods were private. In this process, by which anything that could be recognized as a philosophical doctrine was cut up or chopped to pieces by the realist criticism, the realists little by little destroyed everything of positive doctrine that they had ever possessed. And then he goes on to show the effect this had on their

---

[vii] Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), 3rd Earl Russell; philosopher, mathematician, social critic, prolific author and receipient of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1950.
[viii] In original: "should."
[ix] In original: "aims"
[x] In original: "rules of expediency"
[xi] In original: "promise them private gains which he neither could procure them"
[xii] *Autobiography*, 48-49.

pupils. I believe the phenomenon which Collingwood describes is familiar to those of you who know a bit about what has happened in the past two generations. This is a particularly British version; in America and other countries it is a bit different, but I don't have to belabor that.

Collingwood's conclusion, on the basis of the principle [that nothing is affected by being known], is that everything depends on what knowing is, because knowing does make a difference. The chief and in a way the central thesis of Collingwood is this: Contrary to the realists, knowledge is not apprehending, either sensual or noetic. That is of course a Platonic–Aristotelian doctrine, that knowledge is apprehending. This doctrine was transmitted to Collingwood in this particular form of these British realists. Collingwood saw it was absolutely impossible, and he opposed it. Now what is knowledge?

"What all these people[xiii] were saying, I thought, was that the condition of a knowing mind is not indeed a passive condition, for it is actively engaged in knowing; but a 'simple' condition, one in which there are no complexities or diversities, nothing except just the knowing. They granted that a man who wanted to know something might have to work, in ways that might be very complicated, in order to 'put himself in a position' from which it could be 'apprehended' [as it were, climbing up a very steep roof in order to see what was there—LS]; but once the position had been attained there was nothing for him to do but 'apprehend' it, or perhaps, fail to 'apprehend' it."[xiv]

Against this, Collingwood says that knowledge is a fundamentally twofold process, consisting[4] not[5] [of apprehending], but [of] questioning, raising questions and answering them. "The questioning activity . . . was not an activity of achieving compresence with, or apprehension of, something; it was not preliminary to the act of knowing; it was one half (the other half being answering the question) of an act which in its totality was knowing."[xv]

Now this led Collingwood to demand a radical reform of logic, which he develops in a chapter entitled "Questions and Answers." One can say that the reform of logic consists in this. The logic which he is seeking is not a formal logic, as the traditional Aristotelian logic is supposed to be, [n]or the logic now taught either as formal or symbolic logic. And one can perhaps say that the meaning of Collingwood's attack on the ordinary understanding of logic is that logic has something to do with truth: that formal logic in all its forms separates truth completely from wisdom, and therefore the understanding of truth which logic can have must be radically defective. In other words, the ordinary logic considered propositions. But Collingwood says there are no isolated propositions: every proposition is in fact the answer to a question and cannot be understood except as an answer to that question. Differently stated, in order to be true according to any standard, a statement must be meaningful; and whether it is meaningful or not depends on the context, it does not immediately appear from the sentence itself. For example, if I say "This dog is black," I understand of course that black is a color, a dog is an animal, there

[xiii] In original: "realists"
[xiv] *Autobiography*, 25-26.
[xv] *Autobiography*, 26. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted a phrase in the passage.

are many colors, there are many kinds of animals. All these things are implied whether I think of them or not while I am writing it down or even demanding from everyone that they forget these other things. Now if every proposition is relative to a question, and if the truth resides in propositions, the truth itself must be relative to the question. I think since this statement is of crucial importance I might read this passage.

"If the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question which[xvi] it answers, its truth must be relative to the same thing. Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsity, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as the answers to questions: each proposition answering a question strictly is correlative to itself."[xvii]

Do you discern in this thesis the germs of historicism, in this seemingly purely logical assertion? Truth is nothing "absolute" or inherent in a proposition, so that you can see it by looking at the proposition or at the object of the proposition. It is relative to the question. He has to prove only one more thing, that the questions of any interest are historically variable, to have proven that the truth is historically variable. This comes out in his discussion regarding the history of philosophy as understood by these people in Oxford at this time, these realists who had a very definite view of the history of philosophy:

"It was a doctrine of 'realism' that there is in a sense no history of philosophy.[xviii] The 'realists' thought that the problems with which philosophy is concerned were unchanging. They thought that Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Stoics, the Schoolmen, the Cartesians, etc., had all asked themselves the same set of questions, and had given different answers to them. For example, they thought that the same problems that[xix] are discussed in modern ethical theory were discussed in Plato's *Republic* and in Aristotle's *Ethics*; and that it was a man's work to ask himself whether Aristotle or Kant was right on the points over which they differed concerning the nature of duty.

"In a quite different sense of the word, the 'realists' certainly thought that philosophy has a history. The different answers which various philosophers have given to the eternal questions of philosophy have been given, of course, in a certain order and at various dates; and the 'history' of philosophy is the study by which people ascertain what answers have been given to these questions, in what order, and at what dates. In that sense, the question, 'what was Aristotle's theory of duty?' would be an 'historical' question. And it would be wholly separate from the philosophical question, 'was it true?' Thus the 'history' of philosophy was an inquiry which had nothing to do with the

---

[xvi] "Which" does not appear in the text.
[xvii] *Autobiography*, 33.
[xviii] In original: "It was a doctrine of 'realism' (and this is why Prichard was so cross with me) that in this sense of the word history there is no history of philosophy."
[xix] In original: "which"

question whether Plato's doctrine[xx] of Ideas (for example) was true or false, but only with the question what it was."[xxi]

This is a very clear statement of a view which is still very common, which again could be said to be a relic of the old tradition, but which is only a relic.

To repeat the two points: [First], the questions, the fundamental questions, are identical; and secondly, philosophic questions are simply different from historical questions. That is clear. For example, the question "What did Plato say on this subject?" is not a philosophic question,[6] [whereas] the question "Is it true what he says?," if the subject matter is a philosophic matter, would seem to be a philosophic question. It seems to be commonsensically right. Now what is Collingwood's criticism of that?

"Was it really true, I asked myself, that the problems of philosophy were, even in the loosest sense of that word, eternal? Was it really true that different philosophies were different attempts to answer the same questions? I soon discovered that it was not true; it was merely a vulgar error, consequent on a kind of historic myopia which, deceived by superficial resemblances, failed to detect profound differences.

"The first point at which I saw a perfectly clear gleam of daylight was in political theory. [I think it was not an accident that he saw it there—LS] Take Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*, so far as they are both[xxii] concerned with politics. Obviously the political theories they both set forth are not the same. But do they represent two different theories of the same thing? Can you say that the *Republic* gives one account of 'the nature of the State,' and the *Leviathan* another? No; because Plato's 'State' is the Greek *polis*, and Hobbes's is the absolutist State of the seventeenth century. The 'realist' answer is easy: Certainly Plato's State is different from Hobbes's, but they are both States; so the theories are theories of the State. Indeed, what could[xxiii] we mean[xxiv] calling them both theories of the political, if they are not[xxv] theories of the same thing?"[xxvi]

Collingwood, I would say here on this point, which we will develop later in a more sufficient way, is perfectly correct, is much more sound on historical grounds than this simplistic and arid view. How does Collingwood solve this question? Because there is something in common between the *Leviathan* and the *Republic*; that something cannot possibly be denied. The mere fact that Hobbes at a certain point compares the *Leviathan* to the *Republic* should protect one from the danger of denying the connection. How does Collingwood understand this connection?

[xx] In original: "theory"
[xxi] *Autobiography*, 59.
[xxii] "both" does not appear in the original.
[xxiii] In original: "did"
[xxiv] Strauss omits "by."
[xxv] In original: "if not that they were theories"
[xxvi] *Autobiography*, 60-61. In the original, "*polis*" is in Greek letters.

"There is, of course, a connection between these two things; but it is not the kind of connection that the 'realists' thought it was. Anybody would admit that Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes' *Leviathan* are about two things which are in one way the same thing and in another way different. That is not in dispute. What is in dispute is the kind of sameness and the kind of difference. The 'realists' thought that the sameness was a sameness of a 'universal' [meaning state, of which there are two varieties, or *n* varieties, two of which are the Greek *polis* and the absolutist state of the seventeenth century—LS], and the difference the difference between two instances of that universal. But this is not so. The sameness is the sameness of an historical process, and the difference is the difference between one thing which in the course of that process has turned into something else, and the other thing into which it has turned. Plato's *polis* and Hobbes's absolutist state are related by a traceable historical process, whereby one has turned into the other; any one who ignores that process, denies the difference between them, and argues that where Plato's political theory contradicts Hobbes's one of them must be wrong, is saying the thing that is not."[xxvii]

One more passage that I will read: "Ideals of personal conduct are just as impermanent as ideals of social organization. Not only that, but what is meant by calling them ideals is subject to the same change."[xxviii] In other words, not only is the content of the ideals different, but the concept of an ideal itself is different. What we would mean by an ideal, formally, without any regard for the substance, would differ from what the Greeks would have meant by an ideal. The realists knew that different people, and the same people at different times, have different views and were quite entitled to hold different views about how a man ought to behave. But they thought that the phrase "ought to behave" had a meaning which was one, unchanging and eternal. They were wrong, [Collingwood says]. The literature of European moral philosophy from the Greeks onward was in their hands and on their shelves to tell them so, but they evaded the lesson by systematically mistranslating the passages from which they might have learned it. I mean, these people knew Greek very well, but as Collingwood put it, they systematically mistranslated. He gives this example, the Greek word *dei*.[xxix] These people said [that] when Plato and Aristotle used this word they meant the same thing as what Kant meant when he says "ought," and Collingwood is on absolutely safe ground when he says that is absolutely wrong. That would need at least a very long proof, which is never given by this kind of people. How do they know this Greek word, which means primarily "lack of something," means the same as what Kant meant by "duty"? How do they know that? Of course [they do] not, and they are bad historians and bad thinkers. On this point one can only agree with him.

Now the conclusion. There are no permanent problems, there are only impermanent problems. But these impermanent problems are related by what he calls an historical process. So the state of Hobbes, if we can speak of that, is somehow akin to the *polis*. If I don't see that kinship, I don't understand him. But if I do not see the fundamental difference, I also do not understand him. The fundamental concepts themselves are

---

[xxvii] *Autobiography*, 62. In the original, "*polis*" appears in Greek letters.
[xxviii] *Autobiography*, 65.
[xxix] *Dei*: it is necessary, must; usually denotes lacking. This example occurs on page 63.

historical. A crude historicist would say: There is a formal framework which doesn't change; the content always changes. Much of social science is in this crude sense historicist. For example, when they apply the Max Weberian distinction of the three kinds of legitimacy, traditional, rational and charismatic, they don't treat these concepts as intrinsically historical, so that that they mean if I apply "charismatic" to a Central African Negro tribe and to a Muslim mystical sect, and [to] some Confucian phenomena, and to something in Greenland and something in Western Europe, it is the same: charismatic. They take it to be the same, and Collingwood raises the question: Is it right to assume such a sameness? If you say [that] everywhere you go there will be male and female human beings, there will be babies, young people, grown-up ones, there you are on safe ground. But this is not a subject which as such affects the social sciences, or at least only indirectly. The conclusion:

"It became clear to me that metaphysics . . . is no futile attempt to know what lies beyond the limits of experience, but is primarily at any given time an attempt to discover what the people of that time believe about the world's general nature; such beliefs being the presuppositions of all their 'physics', that is, their inquiries into its detail. Secondarily, it [metaphysics—LS] is the attempt to discover the corresponding presuppositions of other peoples and other times, and to follow the historical process by which one set of presuppositions has turned into another."[xxx]

He develops this in the sequel in the following way. In his logic he had said that the primary phenomenon of knowledge is question. Then it became clear to him that all questions asked at any time rest ultimately on what he calls "absolute presuppositions," meaning presuppositions which are no longer questions or questionable for the people concerned, which are beyond truth and falsehood precisely because they are not answers to questions but the presuppositions for all possible questions. The study of these absolute presuppositions—of these presuppositions which we cannot possibly question without making everything meaningless, and which absolute presuppositions are essentially different in different times and in different places—this is metaphysics. Here you have a very clear statement of what radical historicism is.

Now let us consider that for a moment. Collingwood's principle, namely, that there are absolute principles which cannot be qualified as true or false,[7] obviously differs from the principle of all earlier philosophy. It is a new way of thinking. That means in plain English that all earlier philosophy was fundamentally wrong because it did not know that[8] absolute presuppositions had this character. Collingwood's absolute presupposition is not, as he claims, the substantive principles of the twentieth-century English or Western mind. Here he is mistaken. But his absolute presupposition is this: that all thought rests on absolute presuppositions which are unexaminable regarding their truth. This absolute presupposition is so far from being beyond truth and falsity that it claims to be the most fundamental truth. To repeat, this, what I loosely or vaguely called his historicism,[9] is Collingwood's absolute presupposition, and he claims it to be demonstrable [just] as much as Plato, Aristotle, or anyone else had ever claimed regarding [the demonstrability of] his so-called absolute presupposition. The simple fact

[xxx] *Autobiography*, 65-66.

which I am trying to bring out can be stated, perhaps[10] [unrecognizably] but perhaps also clearly, by the simple statement that it is impossible to run away from reason, try as we might. Did I make[11] this point [clear]? I mean, not this jingle I set forth at the end, but the main point, the same point which came up in the last discussion—but that was in another room,[xxxi] and I know it was relative to the conditions.

Let me repeat the thesis. All human thought rests on ultimate and absolute presuppositions which differ from historical epoch to historical epoch. Do you understand that? Say [a] Confucian Chinese [person] ultimately believes certain things which they are not even able to examine which make possible all the examinings they might do in a secondary sense. Now these differ from situation to situation.[12] This implies of course that a twentieth-century Western[er] also has such absolute presuppositions which he can no longer examine. Perhaps they are liberal democracy or materialism. Now I say Collingwood is mistaken. That is not his absolute presupposition. His absolute presupposition is exactly this overall principle: the changeability of the absolute presupposition—the absolute presupposition regarding [all] absolute presuppositions. Now regarding this highest absolute presupposition, he acts exactly as the philosophers[13] of olden times [did]. They claimed that they can establish [their absolute presupposition] by reason. It is not something imposed by the historical fate. Did I make it clear now? I mean, in a way it is the same old story which can be stated this way: the relativism of relativism is absolutely asserted.

Student: Isn't there another way of looking at Collingwood so that he is not left with concluding that all political theory prior to his own time was false? He talks about the alterability of human nature during the historical process. If we were to assume that human nature changes during the courses of the historical process, then perhaps at a given moment, given the condition of human nature at that moment, the basic presuppositions of that period produced the truth relative to human nature at that time.

LS: But then you have to have a criterion by which you can establish a given state or a given moment in time as the absolute time. And no one has discovered a better criterion than Hegel. All fundamental questions, theoretical and practical, have been settled, because what can you imagine beyond that? That is not what Collingwood said. Hegel—whatever may be wrong with Hegel is another matter—is not open to this difficulty. There are very clear statements—I may quote one of them later—that he does not regard his political theory as the last word, as the final theory. He couldn't do that.

Student: But I don't think that Collingwood makes that claim either. Doesn't he say that for each epoch, and given the conditions of that period, that the presumptions might have yielded a certain truth . . .

LS: But you know that this is the truth only for the time being. That works in secondary matters quite well, but in fundamental matters it is impossible. Then you can only say: As far as I have been able to see hitherto it looks like this. All right. That is modest, and that is always becoming. You have somehow or other always to go beyond that. In [the

[xxxi] After the second interruption regarding the classroom, the class relocated to a different room.

actual] practice of thinking, it doesn't work. That is one of the greatest difficulties: How is knowledge of ignorance possible? That is your question. Because it is the knowledge of ignorance. How is that possible? It is easy to express oneself modestly; it is always disarming, but we cannot leave it at that because modesty is not the highest virtue. Would you admit that?

Student: You could conclude on the basis of this reasoning that there is no ultimate knowledge . . .

LS: But this itself is now an absolute assertion. That is the trouble. For example, Kant in a way tried to prove in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that there is possible only this kind of relative knowledge you have in science, infinite progression. But in order to establish that, he had to show that there is a permanent framework, which is never changing, of science as science. These are the so-called categories. Secondly,[14] Kant [had] to show that there was an absolutely unchangeable moral law which is in a way the basis for science as Kant understood it. Whether Kant's solution is a good one is another question, but it is not open to this difficulty. Somewhere a man has to take a stand, and if one is modest—which one should by all means be, all the time—and simply says "I don't know what is the truth, and I have the feeling that no one ever knew the whole truth, as a simple impression from what one has read or heard," that is defensible. But it is impossible, if I may say so . . . because then one does already more than one can afford on this simple basis. But to say there is no absolute knowledge is an absolute assertion. It is meant to stay and not to be changed, and that is inevitable for any position, including Marxism too.

Student: If this is true, that Collingwood accepts the futility as far as his presuppositions go—

LS: No, no, he doesn't admit that.

Student: But he does say that each historian should attempt to make a philosophy of his own, doesn't he?

LS: He is not completely deprived of common sense. I mean, what would this lead to? Have you ever seen large numbers of historians together? I mean, that every member of the Marine Corps or any other large group should be a philosopher, that is impossible.

Student: . . . that one of his basic things was that after all these historical facts have been adduced the historian should not stop at a simple recounting of facts, but should put them into an organized whole . . .

LS: But these people he would never call historians. He would call them collectors of material.

Student: The question I'm trying to get to beyond these other things—it would seem that he would like to put these things into an organized whole, [so] what can he possibly offer

as an incentive if it must ultimately be shown that even these presuppositions are going to fall by the wayside?

LS: That is exactly the point. How can you live with the perspective that the highest principles are only for the duration? Because if you admit that, you are already with one foot beyond. That can be done only under one condition: if you have a divination of what is beyond. And that must be the absolute. That must be the absolute. The two great examples we have of historicists who faced this question are Nietzsche and Heidegger. That is the only way in which the position can be saved. If I use this impossible word (but it is so practical), the absolute is now for the first time divined, not fully known, perhaps[15] because it cannot be fully known, but surely [we can say] it is not fully known now. Therefore there is a future, but there is definitely an end. Then it is formally possible to determine it. That leads to other difficulties. By the way, an expression of Nietzsche which could be translated into English as "enigmatic vision"[xxxii] would also render well what Collingwood understands by the absolute presupposition. In other words, every culture, every epoch, is ultimately supported by a vision which it cannot possibly make clear, which is an enigmatic vision. Now again the[16] [difficulty] is that by this universal assertion there are *n* enigmatic visions, and they are necessarily the basis of every epoch. This assertion is higher than any enigmatic vision. That is the difficulty. You can say it is much poorer and you can say the nastiest things about it, but it is still higher in noetic dignity because it speaks about all enigmatic visions and understands them in their necessity.

Let me try another point of Collingwood. He turns to another aspect of the same conception, namely the realists' distinction between the historical question (what was so and so's theory on such a matter?) and the philosophical question (was he right?), an apparently commonsensical distinction. First you have to know what Plato taught, and then you can examine it, a perfectly clear distinction:

"I will[xxxiii] point out that the alleged distinction between the historical question and the philosophical question[xxxiv] must be false, because it presupposes the permanence of philosophical problems. If there were a permanent problem P, we could ask 'what[xxxv] Kant or Berkeley or Leibniz think about P?' and if that question could be answered, we could[xxxvi] go on to ask 'was Kant, or Berkeley, or Leibniz[xxxvii] right in what he said[xxxviii] about P?. But what is thought to be a permanent problem P is really a number of transitory problems, p_1, p_2, p_3, and so on, whose individual peculiarities are blurred by the historical myopia of the person who lumps them together under the one name P."[xxxix]

[xxxii] See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 3.2.
[xxxiii] Strauss omits "rather"
[xxxiv] "Question" does not appear in the text.
[xxxv] Strauss omits "did"
[xxxvi] Strauss omits "then"
[xxxvii] Strauss switches Leibniz and Berkeley.
[xxxviii] In original: "thought"
[xxxix] *Autobiography*, 69.

This argument concludes with a remark that the problems that an individual thinker is concerned with, say, Plato or Berkeley or whoever he was, can only be discovered from the solution. The fact that we can identify a thinker's problem is proof that he has solved it, for we only know what that problem was by arguing back from the solution. Now here I think we have to look at it more carefully. Let us come back to his primary assertion: There are no eternal or permanent problems. Proof: the Greek political philosophers deal with the *polis*, and the moderns deal with the state. But the *polis* is not the state, and the state is not a *polis*. I think that is good solid ground. Also, in morals, the Greek word *dei* has nothing to do with moral obligation. I think that is absolutely defensible. But what about this other assertion of Collingwood's, that we cannot know what, say, Plato's problem was from what he says the problem was? He says we can only find it by arguing back from the solution; [only then] can we discover his problem. Why is it necessarily so? We see of course why Collingwood must say that, because conceivably the formula for the problem would be identical in two or three cases. Say Plato and Descartes might conceivably identify the problem, and then there would be permanent questions. In order to avoid that, he says that what they say cannot be decisive. I say, is this historical? I read to you another passage:

"[These people—LS][xl] cannot say, 'our author is here trying to answer the following question. . . . That is a question which all philosophers ask themselves sooner or later; the right answer to it, as given by Plato or Kant or Wittgenstein, is [that and that—LS].[xli] Our author is giving one of the wrong answers. The refutation of his erroneous view is as follows.' His claim to know what[xlii] question the author is asking is a fraud which anyone could expose by asking for his evidence."[xliii]

That is what Collingwood says. I would say: I ask *him* for the evidence. These people of whom he speaks, they may very well not be concerned with the evidence because they know, before having opened the books, that being a philosophic author, he must have dealt with the questions in these and these terms. One could call this criminal levity [. . .][xliv] —but so is Collingwood by not starting from the author's own explicit questions.[17] [Let us] take a simple example, Plato's *Republic*. The subject is justice. Of course "justice" is only the English translation of a Greek word, [and] the Greek word has a very different range from the English word. But how do we know that? From Plato's *Republic*. And it would become clear, if one would take the necessary trouble, that the substance of what we mean by the problem of justice is not different from what Plato understood by it. That is a purely empirical question. "For me, then, there were not two separate sets of questions we ask,[xlv] one historical and one philosophical, about a given passage in a given philosophical author. . . But this did not mean that the question 'was

---

[xl] In original: "He"
[xli] Strauss reads, for an ellipsis in the text, "that and that." The ellipsis at the beginning of the passage is in the original.
[xlii] In the transcript, a handwritten word is inserted here, but it is illegible.
[xliii] *Autobiography*, 71.
[xliv] The tape was changed at this point.
[xlv] In original: "to be asked"

Plato right to think thus and thus[xlvi] on such and such a question?' was to be left unanswered."[xlvii] That is again, I think, trivial.

What Collingwood is trying to say here comes out much more clearly in his *Idea of History* than in the *Autobiography*. In the first place, he has tried to show that philosophy is essentially historical. The correlative argument is that history, and surely history of philosophy, is essentially historical. Now what does this mean? I know there are people in the world who believe one can study any historical phenomenon in political philosophy without philosophizing. But that is clearly absurd. I mean, that is as absurd as if someone says he can show something about the history of music without being musical. More practically stated, how can one understand a page in Hobbes, in Locke, without following their reasoning? As little, by the way, as one can understand a column by Lippmann,[xlviii] or by Sevareid,[xlix] or by anyone else. You must follow him. You must, as Collingwood puts it, reenact his reasoning. That is absolutely necessary.

Now this reenacting of the reasoning, this apparently merely reproductive process, is necessarily criticism. The understanding is necessarily evaluation, because if you see he makes a gross blunder, that is a part of the same process by which you try to understand him. To that extent, Collingwood is right. Understanding is inseparable from criticism. That is a relatively simple thing, though it is frequently grossly misused by saying, "Here Hobbes and Locke contradict themselves," as if they didn't have that minimum of intelligence which the critic has. The interesting problem is not that; the interesting problem concerns only the premises. As you know, every [act of] reasoning starts from certain premises, and you cannot go on *ad infinitum*. Ultimately you accept certain premises as self-evident. Whether you admit that or not is not important. And here we see indeed that different philosophers regarded very different suppositions as self-evident. Well, which of these very different premises are self-evident? Here is where the only important task of the so-called historian of philosophy or of political philosophy rests.

Now let us reconsider Collingwood's denial of the permanent questions. He[18] [makes] a statement in a different, [prior] context, which shows[19] [this] very clearly:

"In passing, I will note . . . that this principle of correlativity between question and answer is also[l] a good deal of claptrap. People will speak of a savage as 'confronted with[li] the eternal problem of obtaining food.' But what really confronts him is the problem,

---

[xlvi] In original: "as he did"
[xlvii] *Autobiography*, 72. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted a portion of the passage.
[xlviii] Walter Lippmann (1889-1974), American writer, reporter, and political commentator; founding editor of *New Republic*.
[xlix] Arnold Eric Sevareid (1912-1992), American radio and television journalist and respected commentator.
[l] In original: "disposes of"
[li] In original: "by"

quite transitory like all things human, of spearing[lii] fish, or digging up this root, or finding blackberries in this wood."[liii]

Well, that is true, but is it not also true that there is something in his problem which is inherent in any man at any time seeking food? Is the need for food not coeval with man as man? And [it is true of] even a specifically human need. You know that for man certain things are poisonous which are not poisonous for other beings, and the same thing applies to nauseating, tasty, nutritious, or whatever have you. That can hardly be avoided.

He gives also this example. The questions "What is knowledge? What is beauty? What is the highest good?" are [all] pseudo-questions. Are they pseudo-questions? Are they not necessary, however difficult they may be to answer? I would like to illustrate it by the example which he develops most fully, and that is the difference between *polis* and state, to which I have to revert later when I speak of Aristotle thematically. Collingwood admits there is something in common between the two, but he seems somehow to say [that] the common thing is not expressible. I would wonder, must it not be spelled out? Is this not the only way in which the difference between *polis* and state can be made clear? Of course that must be done properly, not on the basis of the dogmatic assumption that our modern concept, state, must be the authoritative concept and must supply the proper scheme into which we put *polis*. If we would turn, for example, to Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 17, where he gives his formal definition, he doesn't speak of the word "state": he speaks of the commonwealth, in Latin *civitas*. So that is not the state. And that the *polis* might very well be translated by "commonwealth" as distinguished from state (although it is perhaps not the best translation) is an entirely different proposition.

I think here Collingwood is simply a bad historian. I will develop this at some length later on. Different philosophers raise different questions. Granting that this is true in a way, [20]this does not mean that there are no key questions. For example, what is justice? Now if we compare, say, Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Ethics*[21] with Hobbes, we see an amazing difference, which I mention only because it is a typical difference. Plato and Aristotle do raise the question, What is justice?, from scratch. Hobbes doesn't do such a thing, as you can see if you look at the preface in *De Cive*, or *The Citizen*.[liv] Hobbes starts from a definition of justice, which is the traditional definition, and reasoning on its basis he arrives at a certain problem which in this form is indeed a novel problem. But the innovation is arrived at by a lack of philosophic radicalism. In other words, Hobbes does set [forth] a new problem. But the problem is, in the way in which he introduces it, a spurious problem because it claims to be the fundamental problem and it is manifestly a derivative problem. The permanence of the fundamental problems does not mean that all philosophers, or all men who call themselves philosophers, raise the fundamental questions. Surely not. And in addition—and that is another point which I would say is partly against Collingwood and partly in favor of him—the fundamental questions are not as obvious and as easy to formulate as the realists of Collingwood thought. They think

---

[lii] Strauss omits "this."
[liii] *Autobiography*, 32-33. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted a portion of the passage.
[liv] *De Cive* (1642).

that any available formulation will do. By the way, this great work, the *Syntopicon*,[lv] by Mortimer Adler,[22] is based on such a simple view of the direct accessibility of the fundamental problems. In this respect Collingwood had a point, but only very relative to this notion.

The[23] conclusion of Collingwood's work, which he didn't live to[24] [complete], was a philosophy of history, a philosophy of history which he says should consist of three parts: First, an epistemological section, i.e., how is historical knowledge possible; secondly, metaphysical questions: the nature of what is an event, process, progress, civilization, etc.; and finally, not merely[25] an addition to the traditional branches of philosophy but a new kind of philosophy, according to which philosophy and history would become completely fused. Now Collingwood developed truly only the first part, the epistemological study of history. Now the point which he makes I must mention very briefly. Collingwood was satisfied that in the second half of the nineteenth century an unbelievable revolution had taken place in historical research, comparable in significance only to something like Copernicus or Galileo in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. [A discussion of] that would lead us much too far—I mention only that he was especially interested in one historical problem, Norman Britain.[lvi] Since I know nothing of this subject, I cannot say anything, and I assume that what Collingwood did in this field was of the first order and not open to any criticism. But I can judge of another aspect of Collingwood as an historian. In his *Idea of History* he has a large section near the beginning which we may call the history of history, i.e., a survey of the different ways of historical understanding from the beginning in Greece up to the scientific understanding of the twentieth century. Now this is a very remarkable piece. It is an extraordinary document of the unhistorical character of historicism. Collingwood never raises the question, when he speaks of Thucydides, for example: What did Thucydides intend to do in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*? What was Thucydides's own question he addressed to the Peloponnesian War? Or the even more elementary question: Was Thucydides an historian, i.e., did he intend to be an historian? Perhaps what he wanted to do cannot be understood in terms of our traditional "category" of history.

This historical movement of the nineteenth century, which gave rise to a historical school and later on to historicism, always looked down with contempt on the unhistorical eighteenth century, which measured the whole past by the standard of the eighteenth century. If people were not gentlemen and ladies according to the standard of eighteenth-century England or correspondingly in France, they were simply backward people. The concept of Gothic as used in the eighteenth century is a famous example. You know the complete lack of comprehension of the Middle Ages, that it was mere barbarism. In opposition to this peculiar narrowness, the demand was made in the early nineteenth century that one must understand each epoch by itself, i.e., not measure the Middle Ages by modern standards and not measure any other cultures by our particular example. Every epoch and every culture must be understood by its own standards. One must, in the case of a thinker especially, understand the thinker as he understood himself and not try to

---

[lv] Jerome Mortimer Adler and William Gorman, *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: W. Benton; Encyclopaedia Brittanica, 1952).
[lvi] Britain was under Norman rule from 1066-1154.

understand him better than he understood himself. These are the typical formulas of the historical movement.

Now Collingwood's history of history, in which he passes judgment on all the earlier historians, is unhistorical in exactly this sense: he does not for one moment consider whether a medieval chronicler or an eighteenth-century philosopher of history wanted to be an historian. Maybe he tried to do something entirely different and he acted sensibly according to his standards. How does this happen? I would like to develop this very briefly. The historiography of the eighteenth century and of course of very much of the nineteenth century was progressive, as we may say, meaning there were certain standards of progress in the light of which the historical process proved to be substantially progressive. This was challenged in the early nineteenth century, and this challenge had to do with their doubt of progressivist philosophy as such. People had become uncertain whether the standards in the light of which the earlier generation recognized progress were genuine standards. The diametric opposite of this we may call romantic historiography, the romantic historiography which denied progress and which consisted primarily in a longing for the past, for the foreign or the exotic. Both forms of historiography, the progressivist and the romantic, were not simply contemplative, interested in understanding for its own sake, but had very much to do with practical, even political, goals. But the values, if I may use this term, of these romantics differed of course radically from the values of the eighteenth-century and the nineteenth-century progressivists.

I always found that the most powerful symbol of romanticism, at least of continental romanticism, is a book which is strangely regarded as the longing for something entirely different from romanticism, namely, the so-called literary realism. I mean Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*.[lvii] You know what they mean by "literary realism," I suppose I don't have to explain that.[26] [The realist reading] is, I think, a very superficial understanding of this remarkable book. This book ends in a scene [which I will explain]. Madame Bovary is a peasant's daughter who went very far in intelligence and perceptivity beyond her entourage, her environment. She fails and ends in utter degradation, suicide. Then her coffin stands in the house, and two men are sitting there at the wake: a pharmacist, representative of the principles of 1789, the modern principles; and the priest, a representative of the ancient regime. They talk, and of course they are absolutely opposed. They have a violent debate. Emma is dead. The meaning of this scene from Flaubert's point of view is that the silent Emma is superior to those two noisy disputants. Why is this so? Because the principle of Emma is not any certainty like that of the people of 1789 or of those of the ancient regime: her principle is longing, unfillable longing. Flaubert did not believe that longing is the highest of which man is capable. There are very definite signs in his other novels that he believed in possible fulfillment, but he thought fulfillment is impossible after the French Revolution, i.e., after the failure of the promise of the French Revolution, meaning that you could get a good society on this basis. Now longing has become the highest. The life of the remote past is simply superior to that of the nineteenth century and even to the highest in the nineteenth century, longing.

[lvii] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary: Moeurs De Province* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1857).

Now here is where the difficulty comes in, and I here return from Flaubert to[27] romantic thought in general.[28] We can say the general romantic thesis was that the modern prosaic life is lower than that of the past. It doesn't make any difference where you place the past; there can be *n* different views of that. You can also see that once this particular principle is acted upon it leads to an immense increase in historical interest: that for which you long you will study with infinite care and with infinite passion. But what is the fundamental defect of this kind of thing? I think one can state it as follows. While these people admitted the superiority of an older form of life to the present form of life, they took it for granted that present-day thought is superior to the thought of any past. They took it for granted, they did not think about it. They interpreted the past as a matter of course, in modern terms. Very much of the interpretation of the Middle Ages had this character.

Now let us get back to Collingwood. Why must we interpret all thought of the past in terms of our thought? Because we know as no one before did that no absolute presupposition can be true. In the past, every generation believed that its absolute presuppositions were true; or, and this is only another formulation of the same thing, we are the first generation, so to speak, whose absolute presupposition is demonstrably true, namely, historicism. And from this point of view it is needless to say you cannot possibly study, in particular, the history of history with the necessary passion. You can only do that if you are doubtful of your own categories. If you have the feeling that you may have to learn something, not facts but from the fundamental point of view, if you are not sure of your categories, of your conceptual framework, this is sound. Now ordinary positivistic study of cultures of history is of course wholly unaware of this question, and therefore they simply apply their categories. They do not meet this problem. But even a much more sophisticated position like that of Collingwood is, I think, guilty of the same defect. I can only say that when Collingwood comes to speak of political philosophy and the renovation of political philosophy toward the end of the book, he makes certain remarks which make some sense, without any question, but regarding the fundamental point it is absolutely disappointing. The difficulty which he has here is this. He believes to have discovered that there cannot be any universally valid rules: any universally valid rules. There cannot be any ready-made rules, for the simple reason that any rule which is available stems from past experience. But if there is a radical innovation—if, as this lady said, human nature itself changes—there is always a need for new rules. Very well, but the question is only: How can we distinguish between good and bad new rules? This fundamental distinction surely must survive all change. And here there cannot be any answer on the part of Collingwood, except that he reveals on every page that he is of course on the side of the good. I have no doubt about that. But that is not sufficient.

But I must[29] [refer to one more passage] which, if you have the time, you should all read, because[30] [it] is of some practical value today more than ever.[31] That is a discussion, in a chapter "The Foundation of the Future," of the importance of psychology. The starting point of Collingwood in this reflection is a very familiar one: the enormous progress of natural science and technology, and the cultural lag of the science of men. And the proposal? Psychology, scientific psychology, once it has reached the perfection which

nuclear physics has reached, will be able to dispose of the problems which nuclear physics has created. Then he makes the following point:

"It was easy to see that any attempt to bring ethics within the field of psychology (and attempts of that kind have been made often enough), or to do the same with politics, would necessarily and always result in failure. As I knew very well, the plea 'do not criticize this science; it is in its infancy', rested on a falsehood. Psychology was very far from being a young science; both word and thing had been in existence ever since the sixteenth century. It was not only an old-established science, it had for centuries been a respectable and even a neighborly one. ["Neighbourly" he means to philosophy—LS] It had been deliberately created, as one might guess who knew enough Greek to understand its name, in order to study that which is neither mind in the proper traditional sense (consciousness, reason, will) nor yet body, but *psyche*,[lviii] or such functions as sensation and appetite. It marched on one hand with physiology, and on the other with the sciences of mind proper, logic and ethics, the sciences of reason and will. And it showed no desire to encroach on its neighbour's territories until, early in the nineteenth century, the dogma got about that reason and will were only concretions of sense and appetite. If that was so, it followed that logic and ethics could disappear, and that their function could be taken over by psychology. For there was no such thing as 'mind'; what had been so-called was only 'psyche' . . .

"[Psychology] implies the systematic abolition of all those distinctions which, being valid for reason and will but not for sensation and appetite, constitute the special subject-matter of logic and ethics: distinctions like that between truth and error, knowledge and ignorance, science and sophistry, right and wrong, good and bad [and so on—LS] . . .

"These observations implied no hostility toward psychology proper, the science of sensation, appetite, and their motions connected with them, or towards the Freudian and other forms of treatment for certain ailments, of which we were beginning to hear a good deal . . . At the time of which I am speaking Freud was only a name to me. But when I came to study his works I was not unprepared for the discovery that they reached a very high scientific level when dealing with problems in psychotherapy, but sank beneath contempt when they treated of ethics, politics, religion, or social structure. Nor was it strange that Freud's imitators and rivals, less intelligent and less conscientious writers whom I will not name, reached on these subjects an even lower level."[lix]

So he was perfectly free from the delusion that the salvation could come from psychology, but he believed that the salvation could come from an intelligently conducted history, a history which is surely not the study of mere facts but is primarily a study of thought, but also of course of institutions. And the proof that this, while indispensable, can give us guidance, he never gave; and I think because it is impossible to give it. And the reason again is fundamentally the same: we are ultimately driven—when you say anyone tries to find out the true standards for our time, he must have a criterion higher than our time or our times for discovering the true standards of our time, and for

[lviii] This appears in Greek letters in the original.
[lix] *Autobiography*, 93-95.

distinguishing them from false standards which may also be very powerful in our time. That cannot be avoided.

Now I must say that I believe the problem of historicism leads much deeper, and that Collingwood's presentation is not the most profound that has been given—and that, [as] I said before, is especially that of Heidegger. But I think the fundamental difficulty, namely, the identity of the standards, ultimate standards, regardless of whether they are historically recognized or not,[32] [is a] problem [to which] you will also not find a solution or even an attempt at a solution in Heidegger. And I believe that is there too a fundamental defect.

But one point I think of more importance, of more immediate importance for our present preoccupation, I would like to repeat. That is Collingwood's very sensible emphasis that the very great levity which people have in speaking, for example, of Greek and Latin political philosophy, and using such words as the state and the city-state—and the moral teaching of the Greeks, even that it is a great problem, for what does moral mean? [In addressing these themes] one cannot be conscientious enough, and the only criticism one can have of Collingwood in this respect is simply that he was not careful enough. He did not comply with the standards which he very reasonably raised. We cannot assume—to begin with, saying not only that our present-day political problems are the problems of ancient Greece (that no one would say, of course), but [that] the concepts with which we understand political things were the same concepts with which the Greeks understood [them]: this does not mean an ultimate relativism but it means only a doubt, which is absolutely necessary, that the concepts immediately available now are sufficient. We don't know. The fact that they are now generally in use doesn't prove anything. [There is] a help towards such an examination if we become suddenly confronted with an entirely different "set of concepts," say, those of Aristotle, and [we] see then which efforts are required to reach the dimensions of these problems which can be said to be truly common. But that the permanent problems should be available for the asking is of course an unreasonable demand. With this remark, I conclude my introduction.[33] I will turn next time to classical political philosophy, especially Aristotle. Do you have a question?

Student: You mentioned that there is a basic defect in the romantic view toward history, and you said that this defect was because they applied their own judgment to history and thought they were making a better use of it. Could you give an illustration of this?

LS: . . . if someone would write a history of medicine and speak of certain cures and would show that they are incompatible with what is in the present day regarded as unreasonable. But for an historian that is not so simple because . . . But for this historian who talks all the time about those poisonous things, the near or the remote simply by the standards now prevailing . . . Of course, if someone would write a history of medicine . . . he would speak of certain cures . . . But for a historian, that is not so simple.[34] The physician takes it for granted . . . but for the historian who talks all the time about these poisonous things, unhistorical thinking surely must apply . . .

Student: I don't think that's really what I meant, though. I thought you had said when you were talking about the romantics that they longed for the days past, and yet that their longing was[35] [defective] because of the fact that when they looked back to the thinkers of the past, they thought that they[36] had a better understanding of what these thinkers thought than they did themselves. Is this a correct interpretation of what you said?

LS: I haven't really thought about [this][37]; I speak from memory. Henry James's interpretation of the Middle Ages: Do you remember his schema? The complete unity of the cathedral of Chartres, the schema wholly unknown to any medieval thinker. He looks at the phenomena regardless of how medieval man himself understood them . . . How can you know the medieval phenomena if you do not know how the medieval men themselves saw them?

Student: The thing I was questioning was the explicit use of the adjective romantic. I don't think James would fit into that category.

LS: Henry Adams.[lx] Did I say James? I am sorry. Henry Adams. Surely the interpretation that something had gone wrong . . . and the standard which he applied was the unity which existed in the Middle Ages, and which disappeared more and more in modern times. Originally his standard was only his grandfather['s] New England Puritanism, but gradually he thought . . .

Student: You mentioned that the ancients' great questions of justice [started] from scratch, and Hobbes[38] [began] from their answers and arrived at what he thought was a new problem. But you said [Hobbes's "new" problem] was really spurious because it was derivative. Could you go into that?

LS: That is simple. At the beginning of *De Cive* . . . he started with the definition of justice as the firm and constant will to give everyone what belongs to him. He did not examine that. And then he said: But look, here this presupposes that there is something which is [a] man's own; how can you otherwise give it to him? But there is a second premise: I know that what any man owns is his property not by nature but by positive law. So by nature man has no property. And then I raised the question: That man must have been originally in a state without property, without any law, why did they leave this original state, this so-called state of nature? In order to form society. But do you see that the premise of the whole problem as he states it is something he takes over from tradition? Plato and Aristotle don't do that. They begin with what people say, surely, but they examine that . . . definition has at least the merit of being arrived at through a truer process of definition.

Generally speaking, the statement of Hegel's which I referred to before, that modern philosophy finds its concepts ready-made . . . We have to read Descartes to find that substance, accident, etc., occur as a matter of course. And what happens then is that the

---

[lx] Henry Adams (1838-1918), American historian, descendant of John Adams and John Quincy Adams. For the schema Strauss refers to, see *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904).

next generation doubted. You know Locke said: "What does that mean?" And Hume . . . They raise these questions in the second and third generation [of modern thought], but here in the second and third generations they presuppose already in another way the validity of the achievements of the preceding modern generations . . . Hume presupposes Locke's way of ideas,[lxi] his way of ideas for which Descartes laid the foundations. Locke and Hume presuppose already. You do not have the same philosophic radicalism in modern times as you have in ancient Greece. Therefore there is a special difficulty in understanding modern philosophy—not that it is necessarily technically more difficult, you only have to take a book like . . . compared with the beginning of any Aristotelian book, to say nothing of any Platonic work.

Student: Isn't the presupposition that we have to understand any thinker by their own standard cutting the historian off from any purpose or relevance? If the knowledge is only going to lead to a knowledge of that time, it would seem that there would be no relevance if there were no application to the present situation of man.

LS: That is always a very great difficulty. But under certain conditions, given certain premises, it makes sense. There existed at one time, perhaps more in Europe than in this country, a purely contemplative view of history, a view which was not concerned with the present time or with any view of the future, which only tried to understand the cultures or the epochs which were past. If history is this, if the historical process is complete, if there will be no fundamental or interesting changes, [if], in other words, there are no real tasks for man, what can we do? And if we make the additional assumption that what men have done hitherto, in works and in thought, is the revelation of reason with a capital R, and Reason is the core of everything, what can you do? That was the situation to some extent in the middle of the nineteenth century. And then there was a rebellion . . . questioning[39] [how] these people in their self-forgetting way studied the various epochs . . . what motivated the actors and the thinkers . . . [40][The thinkers] stand outside of these things, and the actors stood within them . . . the view since that time has become absolutely questionable, but that does not necessarily mean that the prevailing view is sufficient, because the prevailing view takes a strange and incoherent view of the purely practical issue of the new nations. You have to know something about them . . . Or if it is not that . . . or it is like Ruth Benedict,[lxii] her interpretation of the varieties of culture, perhaps with the philosophic intention to show that there is no permanent human nature to speak of. Human nature is frequently defined as far as the body goes—I mean, the human stomach is everywhere the same, but in all interesting human things there is a radical diversity. I don't know whether I have answered your question.

Student: How can they talk about philosophy of history? It seems that if they were consistent they would just talk about histories.

[lxi] See Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)).

[lxii] Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), American anthropologist, author of *Patterns and Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934) and *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

LS: But still, the overall view, what holds it together, the Indians, and the Aztecs, and the Eskimos, the overall problem is a human society in its unique character with its particular values or categories.

Student: It seems like a world of flux and change with little particles floating along . . .

LS: Very well, there is a connection. The connection, the unity, is in the method . . . the subject, the historical studies, the study has certain characteristics; you can elaborate them and get a methodology. That is precisely the point. In modern times, the universal science without which men cannot live is methodology. Someone put it very neatly, he said natural science had been an old Greek term, *physike episteme*. When the Greeks used it the emphasis was on nature, when we use it the emphasis is on science, i.e., the emphasis was on the subject matter and now it is on the cognitive side, or more simply put, on method.

Student: Am I right in believing . . . certain principles of absolute truth?

LS: I believe one must assume that[41] [or get] into hopeless difficulties.

Student: On what basis do you say that they are good and "absolute?"

LS: . . . The word absolute as we now use it is an invention of German idealistic philosophy.

Student: Maybe I could rephrase the question, if you would let me. I seem to understand much better your criticism of others' views than[42] [I do your own] positive view[s].[43][lxiii]

LS: Yes, that is perfectly understandable . . . I would say I appeal to things . . . which we do not always make clear to ourselves, and I do not claim . . . All the time we make distinctions between good and bad actions . . . For example, a man like Aristotle, who is a very high example, took the trouble of putting these things together, i.e., by saying what is a good man. And he said that a good man would act [differently] in different situations.[44] For example, in battle he will act very differently than he would act at the dinner table; and he will act differently to a friend than to a stranger, he will act differently at a funeral than a wedding party. These are trivial things, but if you elaborate them, you find that his behavior in regard to money will be different than in regard to honor. Thinking about these matters—and he had had good preparation because he had had [Plato] as [his] teacher,[45] and Plato also had good preparation in Socrates . . . make a distinction between the various forms of goodness, the virtues magnanimity, courage, temperance, justice, and so on . . . Aristotle's starting point is the only conceivable one. We know of human things on the basis of our experience, which includes to some extent the experience of the people who molded us. If we were brought up on an island among

[lxiii] In original transcript: "I seem to understand much better your criticism of others' views that had a positive view of how you think, apart from someone else." It seems that the import of the question is that the student understands Strauss's criticisms of the arguments and views of others better than he understands Strauss's own view.

brutes, what we could learn there . . . People living together in peace in society for many generations is the condition for a man becoming fully aware of what a good man is. In other words, I do not believe that the modern criticism made by very great thinkers of Aristotle and Plato is valid.

And I will take up this question in the rest of the course, meaning: What precisely are the interesting questions? . . . But there are some absolutely fundamental differences. The most striking, powerful [difference] concerns the advantages of modern natural science. Because as Aristotle presented it, his doctrine is linked up with a so-called teleological view of nature, that man has by nature a specific end to which he is destined . . . Now this teleological premise was simply refuted by modern natural science, which by very great success proved that you can have a much better natural science on a nonteleological basis. That is in practice the most powerful thing, but there are [other] arguments which are not directly connected. Especially, that was linked up in the nineteenth century with so-called evolution: you cannot speak of permanent human goals because there is not even a permanent human species, and the line of demarcation between man and our nearest ancestors is very vague . . . That is the most powerful view today. The question of course clearly is whether evolution, even if true, disposes of the fact that there is essential difference between man and the brutes. You know there are evolutionists who admit that when a radical mutation occurs, the being which emerges is no longer intelligible in terms of the preceding stages . . . intraphilosophic . . .

Student: Would you say that, given man's rational nature, that a return to the teleological view would be more successful in understanding his political nature than the scientific method as it now stands?

LS: The scientific method is valueless for the understanding the human things. I mean, whatever they may find about details about the social smile, even if it is true, it is utterly irrelevant for the truly human problems. There is a passage in Plato's *Republic* . . . But for the problems of man as man, as distinguished from other beings, these findings of psychology are of no importance.

---

[1] Deleted "in whatever way."
[2] Deleted "name which occurs"
[3] Deleted "in."
[4] Moved "of."
[5] Deleted "being apprehended."
[6] Deleted "and."
[7] Deleted "this principle."
[8] Deleted "the."
[9] Deleted "this."
[10] Deleted "irrecognizably."
[11] Moved "clear."
[12] Deleted "now."
[13] Moved "did."
[14] Deleted "that was inevitable for."
[15] Deleted "either."
[16] Deleted "question"
[17] Deleted "If we."

[18] Deleted “gives first.”
[19] Deleted “it up.”
[20] Deleted “but”
[21] Deleted “and compare”
[22] Deleted “that.”
[23] Deleted “final.”
[24] Deleted “bring about.”
[25] Deleted “such.”
[26] Deleted “That.”
[27] Deleted “the.”
[28] Deleted “that.”
[29] Deleted “also say one thing.”
[30] Deleted “that.”
[31] Deleted “And.”
[32] Deleted “this.”
[33] Deleted “and.”
[34] Deleted “The medical man.”
[35] Deleted “defectual.”
[36] Deleted “could still, that they themselves.”
[37] Deleted “but.”
[38] Deleted “got it.”
[39] Deleted “that.”
[40] Deleted “They.”
[41] Deleted “without getting.”
[42] Deleted “have a.”
[43] Deleted “of how you think, apart from someone else.”
[44] Moved “differently.”
[45] Moved “Plato.”

Session 8: October 25, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: I completed last time my introduction, which as we have seen was disproportionately long. Before I turn to the subject matter proper, I remind you of the general plan of this course. Today we cannot help starting our reflections from the fact that there is in existence an emphatically scientific political science. Regardless of what its value is, and I myself have indicated that I do not think highly of it, we must argue on the basis of it because it is the quasiauthority within our science. The scientific understanding of politics is distinguished from the commonsense understanding, but in such a way that the scientific political science is necessarily based on the commonsense understanding. Therefore, assuming and granting for argument's sake the soundness of scientific political science, it is absolutely necessary that this political science be understood in [relation to] its inner dependence on commonsense understanding. This requires in its turn that we have a clear and coherent picture of the commonsense understanding of the political things as they come to sight to common sense, i.e., to the citizen or statesman as distinguished from the scientific observer.

I contend then that this commonsense understanding is presented to us in a perfect form in Aristotle's *Politics*, and therefore from every point of view it is necessary for a political scientist who wishes to know what he is doing to familiarize himself with Aristotle's *Politics*. This assertion that we find in Aristotle's *Politics* the coherent and perfect presentation of the commonsense understanding of political things is open to many objections. These objections are by no means ill-founded, as appears from the following consideration. Common sense as we understand it now is understood in opposition to the scientific understanding. It therefore presupposes the scientific understanding. It is, if I may say so, postscientific. Clearly the Aristotelian politics is prescientific, if we understand by science modern science. I will take up this particular objection at a later moment.

Now I will turn to a more simple and elementary objection. Someone could say: Granted that Aristotle is not a scientific political scientist, but that does not yet mean that we have here straight and pure common sense. We have in Aristotle's *Politics* the presentation of a special kind of common sense, of Greek common sense; and not only that, but there is in Aristotle a presentation of a particular kind of Greek common sense, namely, the common sense of the upper class. What about this objection? I will take up the question of the emphatic Greekness of Aristotle's political thought. One could argue as follows:[1] Aristotle doesn't deal with political things as they essentially are, as they always were and will be, for the simple reason that his subject is the Greek city-state. Now let us consider that, first the Greekness. In the second book of the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses three political societies which he regards as particularly respectable: Sparta, Crete, and Carthage. Sparta and Crete were Greek, but Carthage was Phoenician, semitic, in no way Greek. Aristotle treats Carthage as hardly inferior to Sparta, and surely superior to Athens from the political point of view. This alone should show that the city-state which

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 30-35.

Aristotle is concerned with is not [just] the Greek city-state. What is true is only this: according to Aristotle's view, the Greeks were more apt than other peoples he knew for living in city-states. But that doesn't mean that the city-state is as such essentially Greek. It is accidental to the city-state that it is a Greek city-state; as such it is not Greek. This much about the [question of] Greekness.

Now let us turn to the other item, city-state, which is much more important. When we speak of the city-state, we mean a kind of state: that is, the city-state of antiquity, the feudal state of the Middle Ages, the absolutist state of the seventeenth century, and the democratic state of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this thought, "a kind of state," cannot be expressed in Aristotle's language. It is a thought wholly alien to Aristotle himself. In this respect I can only subscribe to what I read to you last time from Collingwood about the assumption of his opponents, whom he calls the realists, who say that since the theme of political theory is the state, Aristotle must have dealt with the state; and since this is not the state as we know it, it must be such a kind[2] which we call for convenience sake the state.

The simple question is: How do these people know that the subject of political philosophy is the state? That needs some investigation. Now when we speak of the state today, we understand state in contradistinction to society. [3][Referring to] what they call the city-state I will now use the simple transcription of the Greek word *polis*, and I will try to make clear what a *polis* is. The *polis* is both state and society—that has been frequently said. The consequence, again in the jargon of our time: Aristotle's *Politics* is political sociology. And on the basis of the present-day notion, that is perfectly correct. It is much more political sociology than theory of the state in the nineteenth-century sense of the term. But we cannot leave it at that, because the notion of *polis* precedes the distinction between state and society. Hence you cannot grasp what *polis* means by putting state and society together again and say[ing], "You have state, you have society; put it together and you have the *polis*," because you have then as a secondary unity what is in fact a primary unity preceding the distinction.

Now in order to understand what the *polis* is, you must begin in a different way and must try first to find what experience still available to us corresponds to the experiences which the Greeks had when they spoke of *polis*. I would say that phenomenon is well known to every one of us. The equivalent, as far as human experience is concerned, to "city" is neither state nor society but "country." You can say, "Right or wrong, my country," but whether or not that is a good principle, I don't enter into now. But you cannot even dream of saying, "Right or wrong, my state." The Greek *polis* is frequently used in classical literature synonymously with another word which is still well known in all languages: in the Greek, *patris*, which is translated "fatherland." Land, country: here you have a connection, so this I would say on the citizen level, on the prephilosophic level, is the equivalent of "country." But of course it is no mere accident that we speak of the country where[as] the Greeks spoke of the city. What does this mean? Now *polis* is not the same as town. "Town" is in Greek a different word.[ii] The city comprises both the town and the country. But the city as city, at least as Plato and Aristotle understood it, is an urban

[ii] The Greek word for town is *astu*.

society. The core of the *polis* are not the peasants, the tillers of the soil, however you might call them, nor any rural gentry: it is an urban patriciate. This is important. The emphasis on the countryside in the modern notion is probably due to the rural origin of the modern states, which are of feudal origin. That is by no means unimportant, but nevertheless there is a genuine correspondence between our notion of country and the Greek notion of the city.

Now in order to understand this a bit more fully, what is the alternative to *polis* in classical thought? When you speak of city-state, you imply that there are alternatives to it, other states. That is wrong, as I have tried to show. The alternative to *polis* in the first place is the *ethnos*, which we may translate by "tribe" or "nation," somewhere in between tribe or nation. A unity of men of the same descent or the same language, that is an *ethnos*. But living rurally in villages, that is [also] an ethnos. There is of course another form of social organization: think of the Persian or Egyptian empires. Empire, let us call it. The *polis* is understood in contradistinction to those two other forms, the tribe and the empire. What is the relation? The tribe is characterized by freedom: these are not the slaves of their rulers, the tribesmen. Freedom, yes, but on the other hand, as we would put it, [also a] lack of civilization, low development of the arts and of manners. The empire on the other hand is compatible with a very high development of arts and manners. There is a famous description of the extremely delicate court ceremonial in Persia: you could not spit in the presence of the king under severe prohibition. There is a high development of arts and manners possible in the empire, but the empire is incompatible with freedom. The ruler, the Persian king, is a master,[4] a despot—these are not free men, his subjects. So the *polis* is characterized by the fact that it is the only form of social organization which makes possible both freedom and civilization. "Civilization" is[5] [here] understood, as you see, in a somewhat more precise sense, not in the vague sense in which[6] [we now speak of a] civilization, or culture of suburbia, or of a gang of juvenile delinquents. It means a high level of arts, possibly including sciences, and manners.

Now it is implied in that [characterization] that the *polis* is a fairly small society. As Aristotle puts it in the seventh book, it is a society which can be taken in well in one view.[iii] You can overlook it. You can overlook the houses; it is not a city of the extension of Chicago, or Los Angeles or New York. They didn't know these, they knew only Babylon; but Babylon, Aristotle says, is not a city because when the enemy entered Babylon from one side and conquered the city, the other part didn't know. This was not a city. A city is something which can[7] be taken in in one view. There are not the houses merely, but the citizen body can be assembled and can do business in the assembly, otherwise it is too large. Now what does this have to do with the particular virtue of the *polis*? A free society, that is the assumption, requires trust. You do not have inherited rulers. You elect them, and you would like to know whom you elect, therefore you must know them. Freedom presupposes trust, and trust presupposes acquaintance. Therefore the free society must be relatively small. A city of course cannot be *too* small, because otherwise it cannot fulfill its function, namely, to[8] [provide] the possibility of development of all human faculties. Therefore the city is not a village. I suggest the following pragmatic distinction between the city and the village: the village is a

[iii] Aristotle, *Politics* 1326b23-24 and 1327a1-3.

community where everybody knows everybody else; the city is a community where everybody knows an acquaintance of everybody else. If you are supposed to elect for office someone you don't know but you know people who know him, people you know and whom you can trust,[9] that "personal" knowledge is always sufficient. We assume an association that is according to nature, as Aristotle says, and that means that [it] is a society that is in conformity with a man's natural power of knowing and caring.[iv] If[10] [the inhabitants] are beyond a certain number, you cannot know[11] [them] as you ought to know them if you [are to] elect them to office.[12] Nor can you in an effective way care for them if they are too many.

Now this concept of the *polis* which I stress is the philosophic concept of the *polis*, and this means not simply derived from the observation of the various *poleis*;[v] it is an attempt to link up the *polis* with the nature of man. This philosophic concept of the *polis*, which was developed classically by Aristotle, lived on for a long time. After it had decayed, it was always restored under favorable circumstances, i.e., there was a possibility of cities.[13] The very great example [of this] was in Italy in the late middle ages and early modern times, where you had again what they called city-states and where classical political philosophy was restored in this respect, too . . . The free society must be small. Let us say [that] a republican society must be small. This was a view which was very powerful until *The Federalist Papers*. The authors of *The Federalist Papers* were still compelled to refute Aristotle, because their opponents, the state['s]-righters,[vi] followed Aristotle and said a large republic is impossible. And they did not only follow Aristotle, because many of them may not have been students of Aristotle, but they followed the uncontested experience of all times and places. All republics had been small societies. The large states were monarchies, if not absolute monarchies. That was, for example, seen in Montesquieu, the greatest authority for *The Federalist Papers*, whose *Spirit of Laws*[vii] takes it for granted that republics are small societies: Venice, for example. But if you have a nation like France, it is necessarily a monarchy. This country was the first attempt to establish a large republic, and it was by no means a foregone conclusion that this would succeed. In the Gettysburg Address you find a reminder of[14] [this] fact. Is it then settled that a large federal republic is possible? Lincoln didn't say it in these words—he used much more noble language—but reduced to its substance, this is what he meant. How long did it take until you got a second example of a large federal republic? France, the famous attempt: when did it become successful? In the course of the Third Republic, late nineteenth century. Today it is taken for granted; and as for the famous example of political liberty in Montesquieu, namely, Great Britain, there are still people who say Great Britain is not a republic, it is a constitutional monarchy. Although I have the authority of Churchill against me, it sounds to me a bit . . . to call Britain a constitutional monarchy if you look at what is actually going on. But even Montesquieu himself makes some allusion to the fact that Britain is a republic.

[iv] Aristotle, *Politics* 1252b31-1253a38.
[v] The plural form of *polis*.
[vi] Usually referred to as the Anti-Federalists.
[vii] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Thomas Neugent (London, 1750).

But this notion, that a free society must be a small society, lingers on in other ways up to the present day, [for example in] the notion of direct democracy. The modern republic is distinguished from the ancient republic by the fact that the modern republic is representative and not direct. There were always misgivings felt, [as] if a representative republic or democracy were [not] a genuine democracy. Therefore the people who insisted on having a direct democracy in contradistinction to a representative democracy were in a way continuing the old tradition of the *polis*. You find the problem today in a much more limited[15] but by no means uninteresting [way] in the large urban areas where everyone feels that there is really an optimum maximum size for people actually living together—you know, not just living together in the wider sense, where all citizens of the United States can be said to live together. For example, one man at Northwestern who wanted to study the problem of municipal areas said that it was proper—although he is a very scientific political scientist—to refer to Aristotle in this respect.[viii] On the other hand, it must also be said that as long as the classical tradition was powerful, this particular element, namely, that the essential unit was the *polis*, was not always maintained. When Aristotle makes a remark at the beginning of the *Ethics* that[16] to dedicate one's self to the goodness of the [*polis*], tribe, or city is higher than to dedicate one's self to the perfection of the individual,[ix] Thomas Aquinas interprets this to mean that the tribe, the nation, as a larger unit containing more than one citizen, is for this reason a higher form of organization than the city.[x] You can easily see how the political situation in Thomas's time had changed, but this is a clear deviation from what Aristotle meant. Now this much for the difference between the *polis* and the modern unit.

For the citizen, to repeat, the equivalent of the city is the country. But what is the equivalent of the city for the modern theoretical man as distinguished from the citizen? I indicated it before, the unity of state and society; and this unity of state and society easily transforms itself into the overall concept of society of which the state or the political element is only an organ or a part. Furthermore, there are two other concepts which are akin to society in this sense, and these are civilization or culture. Through our understanding of "country" we have[17] direct access to what Aristotle meant by "*polis*," but through our theoretical conception of state and society we are prevented from understanding what Aristotle means by *polis*, and therefore an analysis of these modern concepts is indispensable if we want to understand Aristotle.

Now a few points which I will just refer to. According to Aristotle the city is a society which embraces other smaller and subordinate societies, the most important of which is the family or the household. The city is the most comprehensive and the highest society, because it aims at the highest and most comprehensive good at which any society can aim. That is the[18] [aim] of the *polis*. This highest good is happiness. The highest good of the city is the same according to Aristotle as the highest good of the individual.[xi] Now the

---

[viii] It is possible that Strauss is referring to Norton E. Long, professor of political science at Western Reserve University, and Long's article "Aristotle and the Study of Local Government," *Social Research* 23 (1957): 282-310.
[ix] Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1049b7-11.
[x] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, I.II.30.
[xi] Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a1-7, 1278b21-24, 1324a5-8, 1325b14-32.

core of happiness is the practice of virtue, and primarily of moral virtue, i.e., a thoroughly moral man may be miserable. The great example was Priam,[xii] but Aristotle says that in spite of his very great misery,[19] [Priam] never is a wretch. On the other hand, those men we read about every day in the newspapers who have expense accounts and cars, and all these amenities, they are wretches because they have only the externals of happiness and they lack completely the core of it.

The chief purpose of the city is then the noble life, and the chief concern of the city must be the virtue of its members. Hence [the emphasis on] liberal education, because liberal education has the purpose of making men noble and doers of noble deeds. There are a great variety of opinions as to what constitutes happiness. Aristotle knows that. But Aristotle emphasizes that there is no serious disagreement on this subject among sufficiently thoughtful people. In other words, Aristotle knows that a man who is very sick will believe for a certain time, when he is recovering, that health is the only thing that counts. But a thoughtful man knows[20] when he is healthy that health is not the only thing that counts. That, we can say, is the most important implication of the philosophic concept of politics.

In modern times it came to be believed that it was wiser to assume that happiness does not have a definite meaning, for the reason that different men—and even the same man at different times—have an entirely different view of what constitutes happiness. That has decisive consequences. If this is true, if happiness does not have a definite meaning, or if we say in the jargon of our times that happiness is something radically subjective, happiness can no longer be the common good at which society aims, because everyone understands something different by happiness. How then can there be a common good if the highest good is not common? That is a paradox of modern political thought. The answer is this: However different the notion of happiness may be, the fundamental conditions of happiness are in all cases the same. Whether I find my happiness in stamp collecting, or in tightrope dancing, or in reading Plato, I first must be alive. In the second place, I must be free. In other words, there must not be someone around who, when I want to begin my tightrope dancing or my stamp collecting, says: Now you have to feed the cows, or something. In other words, freedom. And the third condition is that I may pursue happiness, whatever I may have meant by happiness. So I arrive at three basic rights: the right to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness.

Now we have a new answer as to what the purpose of political society is: not happiness, but to guarantee the conditions of happiness. And these conditions of happiness are identified with certain natural rights. Political society is limited to this function: to guarantee the conditions of happiness. It must not be concerned with happiness itself, because if it were concerned with happiness it would impose on its members one

---

[xii] Priam was a king of Troy, highly esteemed by allies, enemies, and the gods. As king he oversaw both an extended period of prosperity as well as its destruction in the Trojan War. The war was caused by one of his sons, Paris; another son, Hector, was a great warrior and Achilles' chief rival. After Hector's death and the humiliating mutilation of his corpse, Priam went to Achilles to secure the return of Hector's body. Even in his old age and sorrow during the war, he acted nobly. See Homer, *Iliad* 24.

arbitrary notion of happiness, because there is no objective meaning of happiness. Say there is a fellow who wants to collect stamps and then demands that everybody else collect stamps. That is wholly arbitrary. Let us take virtue, that is also arbitrary. Some people like virtue and others don't. There is a certain verbal confusion. It is possible to call the pursuit of enjoyment by all members of society of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness public happiness. That is what Locke, for example, called it. But public happiness is not private happiness, and ultimately private happiness is what counts. Is it not possible to be absolutely miserable in the midst of public happiness? And is it not possible for some people at least to be perfectly privately happy, and not necessarily in a mean way, in a depression and even in a war?

Another point which should not be forgotten. If the function of civil society is to guarantee the conditions of happiness and not to promote happiness proper, you still need, of course, virtue to some extent, but in a very reduced sense. You need virtue in what can be called a utilitarian sense, in the manner in which Hobbes, for example, analyzed it. If you want to live together, a certain amount of being a good sport is indispensable, but that of course is not a virtue in the strict sense. The main point is this: In the modern scheme, the purpose of the individual—happiness however you understand it—and the purpose of civil society are fundamentally different, because the purpose of civil society is not happiness.

Now let us see what the consequences are.[21] Here we have a society in which everyone is free to pursue happiness as he understands happiness. This striving for happiness on the part of the individual is partly cooperative (the tightrope dancer needs another fellow to hold up the rope) and it is partly also competitive (the stamp collector would like to have more stamps). Through the partly cooperative and partly competitive striving of each individual for happiness as he understands happiness, a kind of web is created. I try to avoid the word relation. That web is what I think we primarily mean by society in contradistinction to the state, because the state merely creates the conditions for the striving of the individuals. This creates a somewhat paradoxical consequence. We see that in one respect the state is superior to society, because only the state has a function, a purpose which is universally valid. This is objective, because the conditions of happiness are assumed to be the same for all. Society on the other hand is inferior to the state, because the aim of the individual is necessarily subjective. On the other hand, what the state does—to secure the conditions of happiness—is to secure mere means. No one could be satisfied with mere means. Whereas society, or the individuals composing society, are concerned with ends. From one point of view, the state is superior to society; from another point of view, the opposite is true. One can also say that in this scheme the public and the common, the state, taking care of the conditions of happiness, is in the service of the private, because happiness is essentially private and individual, whatever that private may be. In other words, the highest ultimate purpose of the individual is merely private. This state of affairs, an uneasy balance between state and society, compels one to transcend the sphere in which both state and society exist somehow as integral parts, and this leads to the concept of culture or civilization.

One more point. If we want to understand the ultimate motive of the distinction between state and society as we know it now, we have to consider the relation of civil society and happiness, and here there is a radical difference between Aristotle and the modern view, a view which emerged in the seventeenth century. Now the interesting thing is that Aristotle in a way knew this modern view—or rather we should say he knew a view which foreshadowed it, and he rejected it. I will read to you a passage, or is there someone here who is trained in reciting? In the third book of the *Politics*, 1280a25 following, Barker translation, pages 118 to 119, Aristotle discusses the following: the ends for which men came together in order to form a civil society, and says [that] if property were the end for which men came together and formed an association—who said that property was the end? Locke. Now do you see the connection between Locke, property, and what I have said before? Property is the means to happiness. Property is not happiness, though it might seem so to misers and such people. But for most people property or wealth is a means to help them pursue stamp collecting or whatever.

> If property were the end for which men came together . . . men's share of authority[xiii] would be proportionate to their share of property . . . But the end of living[xiv] is not mere life; it is, rather, a good quality of life. [If mere life were the end], there might be a city[xv] of slaves, or[xvi] a city of brutes;[xvii] but in the world as we know it this[xviii] is impossible, because the slave and the brute do not share true happiness.[xix] Similarly, it is not the end of the city to provide an alliance for mutual defence against all injury, or to promote mutual exchange and economic intercourse.[xx] If that had been the end, the Etruscans and the Carthaginians [who are united by such bonds] [of economic intercourse—LS] would be in the position of belonging to a single city; and the same would be true of all peoples who have commercial treaties with one another . . . [In these cities that have only economic ties—LS] neither party[xxi] concerns itself to provide[xxii] a proper quality of character among the members of the other; neither asks[xxiii] that all who are included in the scope of the treaties shall be free from injustice and from any form of vice; and neither[xxiv] goes beyond the aim of preventing its own members from committing injustice[xxv] against the members of the other. But it is the cardinal issue of goodness and badness

---

[xiii] Strauss omits "[in the offices and honours] of the state" and adds "authority"
[xiv] In original: "the state"
[xv] Strauss replaces "state" with "city" or "*polis*" in every instance.
[xvi] Strauss omits "even."
[xvii] In original: "animals"
[xviii] In original: "any such state"
[xix] In original: "because slaves and animals do not share in true felicity and free choice [i.e. the attributes of a good quality of life]."
[xx] In original: "or to ease exchange and promote economic intercourse."
[xxi] In original: "of the parties"
[xxii] In original: "ensure"
[xxiii] In original: "neither of them seeks to ensure"
[xxiv] Strauss omits "of them."
[xxv] Strauss omits "[in the course of trade]."

> in the life of the polis which always engages the attention of any polis that concerns itself to secure a system of good laws well obeyed.[xxvi] The conclusion which clearly follows is that any polis which truly deserves the name[xxvii] must devote itself to the end of promoting[xxviii] goodness [or virtue—LS]. Otherwise, a political association sinks into a mere alliance . . . Otherwise, too, law becomes a mere covenant—or (in the phrase of the Sophist Lycophron) 'a guarantor of men's rights against one another'— instead of being, as it should be, something capable to make the member of the polis good and just.[xxix]

Do you recognize something of the modern notion that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? No concern with virtue, only a concern with safety or exchange. The political society is not concerned with virtue. That, one can say, is the typical thesis of liberalism in modern times. It led to a high degree of freedom because of a great relaxation of the demands on individuals, but it also tended to blur the distinction between liberty and license which was crucial to all former thought. That the ancients knew this possibility of an association limited only to the conditions of happiness is of course known to every reader of the *Republic*. The first city described there, the so-called "city of pigs," is a society strictly limited to economic exchange and [is] in no way concerned with the promotion of virtue. It is important to know the difference between the modern view and the classical view familiar to Aristotle.

Before I take that up, I would like to know if I have made myself clear up to this point. The points which I regard as crucial are these. First, the correspondence of our notion of the country to the Greek notion of the *polis*. That I would say is prescientific, prephilosophic. The ordinary citizen can understand that. And on the theoretical level, the fact that the distinction between state and society has superseded the concept of the *polis*, and that the precise difference between state and society on the one hand and *polis* on the other is the relation of both items to happiness. Are there any questions? Yes, Mr. Seltzer?

Mr. Seltzer: I feel that the main problem in understanding this is to try to understand why such exceedingly thoughtful men as the philosophers at the beginning of modern times had to reject the notion of happiness meaning moral virtue, and thought that happiness is radically subjective. That is, to prove that because men had entirely different views of what constitutes happiness it is [therefore] radically subjective seems clearly not to answer them.[xxx]

LS: That is quite right. One could say that if one looked at the beginning—for example, say at Hobbes. Hobbes would not say that happiness is merely subjective. He expressed it

---

[xxvi] Strauss omits "[*eunomia*]."
[xxvii] Following "is," the text reads: "truly so called, and is not merely one in name."
[xxviii] In original: "encouraging"
[xxix] In original: "a rule of life such as will make the members of a polis good and just."
[xxx] Presumably "them" refers to the ancient philosophers.

very clearly, especially in his early writing the *Elements of Law*.[xxxi] There he has a definition of happiness. He compares the human passions to a race. For example, to fall is to lose. Sadness means we are falling behind, and that is something to be sad about. To forsake the race is to die. This comparison is introduced by the remark that human life can be compared to a race, and this race must be supposed to have no other end or garland except being foremost. Hobbes had this definite notion of felicity. For Hobbes, happiness is objective . . . [xxxii] say what Achilles said in the *Iliad*: always to be first and to be superior to the others. In Locke, this thing is a bit more ambiguous.

Let me read to you a clear passage about the subject[22] from Kant, *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*[xxxiii] (and that goes through the other works of Kant as well): "If it were only equally easy to give a definite conception of happiness, the imperatives of prudence would correspond exactly to[xxxiv] those of skill, and would likewise by analytical." I don't have to explain this to you now.

> Unfortunately the notion of happiness is so indefinite that although every man wishes to attain it, yet he never can say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills. The reason for[xxxv] this is that all the elements which belong to the notion of happiness are altogether empirical, that is they must be borrowed from experience.[xxxvi] Nevertheless the idea of happiness requires an absolute whole, a maximum of welfare, in all conceivable[xxxvii] circumstances. Now it is impossible that the most clear-sighted, and at the same time most powerful being (supposed finite) should frame for himself a definite conception of what he really wills in this [namely, in this conception of happiness—LS]. Does he will riches? How much anxiety, envy, and snares might he not thereby draw upon his soul.[xxxviii] Does he will knowledge and discernment? Perhaps it might prove to be only an eye so much the sharper to show him[xxxix] the more fearfully the evils[xl] now concealed from him[xli] that cannot be avoided, or to impose more wants on his desires which already gave[xlii] him concern enough. Would he have a long life, who guarantees to him that it would not be a long misery? Would he have

---

[xxxi] Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (1640; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[xxxii] The original transcript has two periods here, likely standing for an ellipsis, which might mean that the tape was inaudible or that Strauss paused.
[xxxiii] Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949). First published in 1785.
[xxxiv] In original: "with"
[xxxv] In original: "of"
[xxxvi] Strauss omits "and."
[xxxvii] In original: "my present and all future"
[xxxviii] In original: "shoulders"
[xxxix] Strauss omits "so much."
[xl] Strauss omits "that are"
[xli] Strauss omits "and"
[xlii] In original: "give"

> at least health? How often has uneasiness of the body restrained from excesses into which perfect health would have allowed one to fall. In short, he is unable, on any principle, to determine with certainty what would make him truly happy; because to do so he would have to be omniscient. (Sec. 2, 41-42)

Therefore happiness must be disregarded in the fundamental reflections on morality and also of politics. And in political teaching, the object is not happiness but the fundamental right of freedom . . . I have to use a convenient formula which is relatively intelligible . . . I have to try to see what we must abstract from . . . if we want to understand.

Student: Where could one go to get the most convenient statement? Would he go to Hobbes, or to Machiavelli, or to Descartes?

LS: Originally I believed that Hobbes would be the most convenient. Hobbes was the first to say that he would break altogether. But after I thought about it, I saw that one must go to Machiavelli, who is less noisy but he raised his claim as strongly as Hobbes, only in a more subdued manner.

Student: It seems to me that a further objection might be raised here. It could be said that however good it might be to have a *polis*, this is not a possible situation any more. It is not possible to have a state small enough for everyone to get to know everyone.

LS: . . . If someone would say that a *polis* is altogether impossible under these conditions in which we live . . . We are not concerned with what is possible now, but with what is desirable in itself. The very fact that a *polis* is impossible now under our conditions might only mean that we poor wretches live under very unfavorable conditions . . . The theoretical problem concerns not what is possible in these conditions, not the accommodations, the adaptations, the compromise, but what is in itself most desirable . . . Someone could say: I don't see why the demand that the end of civil society is virtue requires a *polis* . . . What we call an aristocracy is in fact an oligarchy. Aristocracy means the rule of virtuous men. But how does this work in practice? We have an assembly of all members of the city and we say that only the virtuous will have full citizen rights . . . How do you recognize virtue? That requires a sharp eye, and not everyone has a sharp eye. Now the practical test was this: old wealth . . . that can be established, how much property the family has and since when they had it. But you must also say there are black sheep. Therefore what is reasonably sure is old wealth. Whether you will have the rule of virtue is still another question. But still, in the primary consideration one must have clarity about what one ought to demand. For every sensible man the necessity for compromise goes without saying, but one cannot make intelligent compromise if one does not know in the first place what he wants . . . therefore these considerations are not irrelevant. And by the way, they have very great practical consequences. We do not necessarily think today when we speak about political matters[xliii]

[xliii] The tape was changed at this point.

—and that the political arrangements, so to speak, are only means which would be most favorable to that kind of education. Education on the other hand primarily meant for Aristotle always formation of character, not skills and not knowledge. That is also important. Some people needed Sputnik[xliv] to see that certain notions of education which have become powerful in this country might not be quite in order. A very simple analysis (which I will not do for you) of these notions of education would show how in fact they come from a certain notion of democracy. You see how closely certain practical things [like] education are linked up with the political. The Aristotelian–Platonic conception was that the most important thing was virtue, and therefore the right kind of order is an aristocracy. [This] surely led to a more intelligent view of education. That was the truth of the old practical wisdom. You must translate these universal statements into terms of your own actions[xlv] in order to see what they mean. Yes?

Student: How did Aristotle think about the relationship between the cities? How did Aristotle think of the relationship between the *poleis* in Greek society?

LS: Strictly speaking, while the term sovereignty did not exist,[23] it was understood that every *polis* had its own magistracy, its own laws, and its own politics. It would be self-determined. That was understood. Now the question was—and Aristotle doesn't go into the question of specific policies, [24]and surely not into the question of foreign policy. That itself is very interesting, that Aristotle was as tough and as levelheaded as, say, Machiavelli, but when you speak foreign policy, you find almost nothing like that [in Aristotle]. That is not because he was not aware of that—a man who had heard of the Peloponnesian War would know how important foreign policy is—but that has to do with a radical principle of morality. Just as for the individual everything depends ultimately on what is within his responsibility, the same is true of the *polis*. If I may use terms now familiar: the good individual must be inner-directed.[xlvi] The same is true of the *polis*. Let us make our *polis* as good as possible. Adorn the Sparta which you have received. Then of course that follows, as someone has said, "as the night the day," that if you are[25] true to yourself, you will also be true to others.[xlvii] But you have much less obligation to outsiders than to your own people. That was clear, that was understood.

This was of course linked up with the question of Greek and barbarian. There was surely a feeling of unity among the Greeks because of a unity of language, because of the unity of their cult, and also memories which separate them off from the barbarians. Aristotle was opposed to the mixture of Greeks and barbarians which Alexander the Great began. Again, it is not enough to become morally indignant, although one should also become morally indignant in the proper place, but first one must understand. And the principle I

[xliv] Sputnik was the first artificial satellite. It was launched by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957.

[xlv] The original transcriber notes that instead of "your own actions" Strauss might have said "or only wishes."

[xlvi] For "inner-directed," see David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

[xlvii] *Hamlet,* act 1, scene 3.

believe is discernible: if by spreading, you yourself get thinner, then you shouldn't spread. Do you see what I mean? That was, I think, the point, that Greece was not sufficiently unbarbaric. The Greeks knew that they came from barbarians themselves. Thucydides's *History*, book 1,[26] [shows] that very beautifully, and also Euripides in some of his tragedies. The Greeks had barely overcome barbarism—they hadn't really overcome it. The Peloponnesian War showed the terrible barbarism of the Greeks, as the intelligent Greeks saw. Now that they should even spread[27] [themselves] thinner instead of concentrating did not suggest itself as wise policy to Aristotle. Still, Alexander may have been right from a simple political point of view. Greece was no longer strong enough to maintain equilibrium—but that is of course not quite true, because Persia was a walkover for the Greeks, Xenophon and his ten thousand troops; there was nothing to fear from Persia any more. But Greece was no longer strong enough to defend itself against the Greek barbarians of the north, Alexander and his Macedonians. Alexander could write the ticket, Aristotle could only advise. To look at this always from a so-called world-historical point of view, you know, the great benefits we owe to Alexander's conquest of the East—that in this way the Orient became Hellenized, and this had very great advantages—that is not the element of a fair judgment, because Alexander couldn't know of that. What he knew was only what he did, [and] that [it] would lead to the fact that there would be Greek philosophical schools very far in the East, in Northern India and in Eastern Persia, which would be perhaps the only homes of learning in later times when barbarism would have overrun the West, who could know that? That is what a philosopher of history in retrospect can say, but that never can enter a fair political judgment. There you can only judge on the basis of what you really know. One simply can't say what would have happened had Alexander obeyed Aristotle. No one can say that.

Student: It seems to me that Aristotle's view of education and virtue and everything could lead[28] in a sense to a totalitarianism, you might say, something similar to Calvinist Geneva or something like that, because everyone is supposed to be virtuous. Who defines virtue?

LS: It has often been said that the *polis* was totalitarian. One can say that is true. In other words, there was no province of human activity which was regarded as exempt from supervision by the *polis*. That was the situation. The tragedy and the comedy were performances by the *polis*, the famous statues of Phidias[xlviii] were made at expense of the *polis* [and put] in temples and other buildings belonging to the *polis*. Everything was in this sense an affair of the *polis*. The difference[29] [between Aristotle's understanding of the *polis* and our understanding of totalitarianism] is perhaps, one could say, of no practical importance. Indirectly, yes, but not directly.[30] Aristotle implies that there is one and only one human activity which essentially transcends the *polis*, and that is thinking, philosophy. That was the only thing. Surely that was[31] [his] position, there [is] no question. But this is a word, "totalitarianism," where we usually don't make a distinction. There are people who say, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a totalitarian. What does that mean? In the present-day sense he was as antitotalitarian as Aristotle, because

[xlviii] Phidias (c. 480-430 BCE), Greek sculptor, painter, and architect; his works include the Statue of Zeus at Olympia and the Athena Parthenos.

today totalitarianism does not mean the totalitarianism of a society but the totalitarianism of government. That is an entirely different proposition. Rousseau would never have said that the government has such unlimited power as Hitler and Khrushchev claimed or claim. Never. That power belongs to the society at large, to the people. Incidentally, regarding this point you must not forget that according to the well-known view of people who are now called liberals the same is true. Where are the limits of the power of the majority, according to that doctrine? Sure, the Constitution, but the Constitution is changeable: by a sufficiently large majority all those amendments[xlix] can be taken away. The whole modern doctrine of sovereignty—what is the statement about the British Parliament? It can do everything except make a man a female. What does it mean? There is nothing which is in principle exempt from legislation. That is not so simple.

Totalitarianism has a very clear meaning if you say that a government that is in no way subject to popular control can do literally what it pleases, not only not subject to popular control but there cannot be a guarantee. There cannot even be a presumption that the governors are superior in wisdom and virtue. A guarantee is very hard to get for that, but there is not even a presumption that they will be virtuous and wise. There is absolutely nothing that can stop them; there is no independent judiciary and all those other things. That is, I think, the precise meaning of totalitarianism. [By this measure, Aristotle's teaching is anti-totalitarian.] But if you take as the standard of totalitarianism and liberalism, say, [that] of Adam Smith or what is thought to be the view of Adam Smith, then of course it is totalitarian. In Aristotle there is of course no sanctity of property. It doesn't exist. If the accumulation of property in certain hands creates a danger for political society, there is no question for Aristotle that the state can interfere by confiscatory taxes and what ever it may be, or simply by making a ceiling to the property which an individual may own. In every political situation, quite legitimately, at least in modern times,[32] certain general concepts [are developed], as, for example, the concept of totalitarianism today. For our orientation now it is sufficient, but once you treat these not as provisional concepts but as universally valid, then you get into troubles. More reflection is needed about that. The most popular distinction today would be that between conservatives and liberals. For practical purposes it is relatively easy to say what in present-day America makes a man a conservative or a liberal, but that would not have made him a conservative or a liberal thirty years ago, or maybe thirty years from now, or in another country. One must not absolutize the patently ephemeral. The simple protection against that is to have some knowledge of other ways of thinking, in other times and in other countries. Yes?

Student: Do you want to connect or would you connect what you call the modern doctrine with the development of modern economics and capitalism?

LS: First I would like to make clear one point on which I touched. I said there is a certain Aristotelian view of the end of society, and that is what gives meaning to the concept of the *polis*, and then there is a modern view of civil society which goes together with another understanding of happiness that becomes clear through the distinction between

[xlix] That is, the amendments to the Constitution, the first ten of which make up the Bill of Rights. There are currently (in 2018), twenty-seven amendments to the Constitution.

state and society. Now this modern view we have seen, of people like Hobbes and Locke and also others, reminds of a view with which Aristotle was familiar, you know, that the only function of society was to make possible[33] exchange[s] between individuals. When he speaks of it in the passage I read to you, he mentions an individual, Lycophron, and he calls him the sophist Lycophron. Let us call just for convenience sake the ancient position which seems to foreshadow that modern position the sophistic position, without any value judgments. And that is a very long question, what is a sophist; but that you find in every textbook, that certain individuals called the sophists were much closer to the modern liberal notion than Plato and Aristotle. There was a man, a classical scholar, Havelock,[l] who wrote a book about the liberal temper in Greek philosophy in which he tried to show that practically the view of present-day American liberals were all there when these terrible fellows, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, came and crushed it.

Now I would like to make this clear, for a better understanding of the whole issue. Now the first point: Aristotle says that happiness is the end of the city. What do the moderns say? They deny it. What do the so-called sophists say? Is happiness the end of the city? You must have read the first book of[34] [Plato's] *Republic* or[35] [the] *Gorgias*, [or the *Protagoras*], or similar statements where you have some notion.[36] I would say that here they[li] are in agreement [with Aristotle]. Happiness is not the end of the city. It is restrained . . .

The next point: Happiness [is] objective, on various levels. Aristotle cannot so easily reduce it to a simple formula. He gives a very strict formula for happiness, but then he has also a looser notion, which he develops in the *Rhetoric*—and by the way, it is a real pleasure to read that and to [let Aristotle] show you that human nature does not change, when you look at the enumeration of the elements of happiness—friends, children—but I don't want to go into that. But happiness is objective. What is[37] the situation [here]? The moderns fundamentally say no; the sophists say yes, happiness is objective. In other words, if someone thinks happiness consists in stamp-collecting, he is a fool. If someone thinks happiness consists in being the ruler of a tyrannical city, that is something [else].

The third item: The purpose of the city, or the end of the city, is all-comprehensive. That is what you meant by totalitarian. But I tried to avoid that. The moderns say, no, [the end is] limited. Even Hobbes says that, by the way. For Hobbes . . . comprehensive . . . only derivative because there is no way of drawing a legal line between what the sovereign may or may not do. But in itself it is limited. The sophists say yes, [the end of the city is comprehensive]. This was number three.

Number four. These formulas which I use are of course perfectly idiotic—I mean the letters I use, and I can only hope that you don't copy only the letters. The fourth item: Disharmony, in Aristotle, between private vice and public interest. If you are a vicious man, you are as such not only a disgrace to your society but you do damage to it. The

---

[l] Eric A. Havelock (1903-1988), British classicist and author of *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). Strauss reviewed this book in "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 12 (1959): 390-439.
[li] That is, the sophists.

sophists say yes, but only they think of the other side. They take the side of private vice. But in the thesis they agree. Where are the moderns? In the clear case, they deny that. Mandeville,[lii] private vice, public benefits, is not only the view of one individual.

And now I come to the last point. Aristotle teaches (we will take that up later) that the *polis* is by nature. Let me state it as follows: There is a natural order of society. The sophists say no, because the *polis* is against nature. These modern people in the seventeenth and eighteenth century say, yes, there is a natural order. So there is the schema. If you look at it you see that the agreement, the formal agreement between Aristotle and the sophists is amazingly great. The disagreement between the moderns on the one hand, and Aristotle and the so-called sophists, is much profounder. There is only one point where Aristotle and these moderns agree: in their assertion that there is a natural order of society. But they mean something very different by that. The natural order of society is according to Aristotle the good *polis*: not only the *polis*, but a well-constructed *polis* which fulfills its function. According to this modern view, the [natural] order of society must be the system of natural passions which, without any restraint to speak of, produce a harmony. The economic system is of course a classic example of that, in the old liberal sense. This[38] [statement that] I gave you is much more an answer than a way to articulate the question,[liii] and perhaps we try later on when we are more advanced to elaborate these points. But someone wanted to bring up a point. Yes?

Student: I was wondering if you would clarify what you mean by "modern." You have been using as illustrations primarily seventeenth-century men.

LS: Also eighteenth-century.

Student: Well, then I question some of the categories, if you include the eighteenth century, because I don't know you would fit in—

LS: Give me an example, and I will see.

Student: The strains of the radical enlightenment, people like Saint-Just[liv] [and] Robespierre,[lv] who emphasize in fact the validity and the propriety of the state to and not only to [institute] a reign of virtue is what I'm getting at.

LS: In other words, that is a special interpretation of Rousseau. But Rousseau is really the one whose work constitutes the break with what I call the first wave of modernity. All

---

[lii] Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733): a physician who wrote on morality and economic theory; author of *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1714).

[liii] It is possible that Strauss said or meant to say that his statement was less an answer than a way to articulate the question.

[liv] Louis Antoine de Saint-Just (1767-1794), French military and political leader associated with the French Revolution.

[lv] Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794), French lawyer and politician associated with the French Revolution and Reign of Terror.

such statements need footnotes to be true, yet they are nevertheless necessary if one wants to have any clarity. In the first stage, which begins with Machiavelli and which ends in Rousseau (because Rousseau both participated in it and reacted against it), one can say the attempt was made to find a substitute for virtue in some passion, whichever it might be: self-preservation or desire for property or anything of this kind. Rousseau, as I say,[39] accepted self-preservation as the basis of his political doctrine, and yet he breaks with that. That is not my fault—I don't even say that is the fault of Rousseau. It was an attempt to solve the political problem on that, say, Hobbean basis, after Rousseau had realized that the Hobbes–Locke answer is radically insufficient. That would lead me, however, too far. These things need qualification at all points, I grant you that.

What I wanted to make clear is only that we must not, when we read such a passage as this one about the ancient school which said that the function of the *polis* is to protect property or to make possible the exchange of goods and services and prevent bodily harm and this kind of thing, believe that this is identical with the similar doctrine of modern times. There are profound differences. If I were merely concerned with formal impeccability so that I wouldn't need footnotes, I could have said something very simple. That this doctrine which Aristotle sketches there, and of which we know a bit from other sources, is distinguished from Hobbes and Locke, and of course Rousseau, by the very simple fact that Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau admit a natural right, and these so-called sophists denied that there is a natural right. But that is in a way even less intelligible than what I said. One would have to develop that. Do you understand this statement in itself? Hobbes, Locke, [and] Rousseau[40] [presented] their doctrines on the assumption that there is one fundamental natural right which as such supplies the standard for judging any civil institution or laws. That is the right of self-preservation of the individual. The difference between Rousseau and Hobbes–Locke can be stated very simply, because he stated it very clearly. Hobbes and Locke assumed that the transition from [positing that] the primary motive for association [is] self-preservation to civil society is wholly unproblematic, i.e., any shrewd, enlightened self-interest tells you that if you want to survive, you have to live in society where there are policemen and penitentiaries and gallows and all the other means of happiness. I mean, surely they are means of happiness of the potential victims, that the murderers are hanged. That was the view in former times. Enlightened self-interest is the link between self-preservation and civic virtue. That was what Hobbes and Locke said. Rousseau said that enlightened self-interest is not enough. Enlightened self-interest doesn't make you a genuine citizen: that you enter society for the sake of self-preservation must in a way be forgotten by you, if you are to be a good citizen. That is the paradoxy of civil society according to Rousseau. That is what Rousseau meant by virtue.

Virtue, while ultimately derivative from self-preservation, is in another sense in opposition. The simple proof is this: civil society cannot exist if it cannot defend itself. That means armies, that means willingness to [suffer] the supreme sacrifice. There Hobbes is in great trouble: I entered civil society in order to protect my life, and now civil society asks me to go to foxholes. Is not that a self-contradiction? The simple solution would be of course the abolition of war. Hobbes has no real solution, but the direction of his thought is revealed by this beautiful remark, [in] a description of war, [of the soldiers]

in a battle, and I think that is unrivalled in the whole history of descriptions of battles: If there is a war, there is a running-away of both sides, but if they do it only out of fear, not out of [the desire for] treasure, then it is dishonorable indeed but[41] not unjust. Why? Because the principle of justice is self-preservation. You cannot of course have an army on that basis. Incidentally, a similar difficulty arises in regard to capital punishment, because you enter civil society on the condition that your life be protected. Now the law takes away your life. That was[42] why Beccaria, an Italian criminal lawyer, at the end of the eighteenth century on this Hobbean basis demanded the abolition of capital punishment, because that is against the social contract. It is a genuine difficulty for Hobbes. Now Rousseau took care of this by simply saying that with the entry into civil society a complete reversal takes place, a complete change. While civil society is rooted in self-preservation, it is also in a way opposed to self-preservation. Some people would call this a dialectical relation. That is the difference between Rousseau and Hobbes–Locke. Therefore virtue: a great word for Rousseau, and still more for these savages, the executioners Saint-Just and Robespierre.

Student: It seems now that you are making fun of or criticizing Hobbes and Locke, and a while ago you were saying we couldn't consider whether Aristotle is practical for the moment, but that we should read him for a theoretical account of what we would like if we could have it.

LS: I believe that Hobbes's and Locke's doctrines, as stated by them, are untenable. Whether my reasons are good or bad would have to be examined . . .

Student: There are two possibilities: one, that they don't provide for happiness; and two, that they don't work in any case in a practical situation. It would seem to me that either of those would be a reason for saying that they are untenable.

LS: That would be a secondary matter. What I have in mind is: Do they give us precisely, for the best case that we could in reason expect, a sufficiently clear and definite guidance? It is much more visible in Hobbes, for he had this unusual frankness. He shocks everyone. And Locke was a much more cautious man.

Student: So you're saying that Hobbes's and Locke's system is inadequate because it doesn't show the way to the good life as Aristotle did, it only provides an empty framework?

LS: A minimum framework. No one could say that self-preservation is negative. Very schematically, Aristotle says this in the *Politics* somewhere: society comes into being for the sake of mere life. But it is, after it has come into being, the good life. The good life is the guiding orientation.[lvi] Now if you delete that and say mere self-preservation—and the motive is interesting. The motive was this: self-preservation is something which all

---

[lvi] *Politics* 1252b28-30: "The complete community, arising from several villages, is the city. It reaches a level of self-sufficiency, so to speak; and while coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well." *Aristotle's* Politics, 2nd ed., trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

people desire, because not all men are really concerned with the good life. Therefore, if you build on this foundation, you build on a solid ground, low but solid—no, that formulation I learned from Churchill. That explains also the terrific success it had, because you could do something with it in very large areas. But the trouble is [that] it doesn't provide for virtue.

Student: I would agree that that is altogether true of Hobbes, but in Locke and Hume the presumption is that their low but solid state, which preserves life and property, provides the means, perhaps undefined, to the good life also. In other words, the highest objective in Hume and Locke is not just survival, but it is in Hobbes, I grant.

LS: I would say I don't think the difference between Hume and Locke and Hobbes is really fundamental, but that is purely an historical question, and we don't have to go into that. The main point you make, if we provide for the solid means for any good life and leave the good life undetermined, that is exactly what I meant before. Happiness remains subjective. We have today, for example, this. No society has ever been so wealthy as the affluent society. Is the affluent society clearer about the use to which it is put? That is a very moot question. And I think that is reflected in our academic sphere in the sciences, both natural and social, which are means for increasing almost infinitely human power and also human wealth, and [they] are unable to tell us anything about the proper use [of them]. That is subjective. It seems to me that while men like Locke and Hume were very far from this value-free position, they prepared it, in a way. It seems impossible to build on this. It is too small. At first it seems extremely promising. Why these complexities about human excellence and the subtleties there?

And you also must not forget another point. These men were all opponents of something which at that time was extremely powerful, and that is the real practical meaning of self-preservation. Now what is the practical alternative, I mean on the massive political everyday level, to self-preservation? Hobbes again is most outspoken and clear, but once you have seen it in Hobbes, you can also see it in others. Hobbes also calls the principle the fear of violent death. He says that death is feared by man as the greatest and highest evil. The same Hobbes denied that there is a highest good. That is interesting, isn't it? Since you ultimately take your bearings by the highest, if there is no highest good you will naturally take your bearing by the highest evil. And this negativity of orientation is very clear in Locke: away from pain, that is much more powerful than toward pleasure. That is the teaching in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.[lvii] But what is the alternative to the fear of violent death? Hobbes says it in the *Leviathan*, where anyone can read it: the fear of the powers invisible. That is a very delicate expression. He means a fear of God, of angels, of devils; fear of hell. It was a daily experience that people were willing to face death and torture like nothing, because they were sure it was their religious duty. That led to anarchy, to religious war, to persecution, and to all the other famous evils, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in all countries more or less. How could you get rid of that? That was the problem.

[lvii] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). First published in 1689.

How can you get peace, security, stable secular government which guarantees the peace of each if everyone is compelled to act on the principle, fear of violent death, or positively stated, the desire of self-preservation? This is the basis of the whole social fabric. In the case of Locke, there is this point to be considered. In England the controversy took on gradually the form of the opposition between the Tories and the Whigs. The Tories[43] were fundamentally in favor of the *ancien régime* of the Stuarts, [and it] took them a long time[44] to swallow the Hanoverians. What was the symbol of the Whigs, at least according to Macaulay's very imaginative and vigorous presentation? Not simply the chapel, but the Bank of England. Who was one of the cofounders of the Bank of England? John Locke. So in other words, the practical meaning of self-preservation is property.

I have said on occasion that property is self-preservation that has taken on flesh. Not the thin thing, mere life, but to live well. That was the great struggle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which [apparently] ended in the eighteenth century until a rebellion against[45] [it] started. That is a most interesting side of Rousseau's work—not the terrors of the French Revolution [that] were determining, but Rousseau. Rousseau's key point is this from the very beginning: the ancient political thinkers speak all the time of virtue and education, and the moderns speak of nothing but trade and finance.[lviii] That was originally the issue. The whole thing is divided among many thinkers. Hobbes plays a great role, and Locke, and Hume, and also such worthies as Mandeville, and of course Adam Smith, and quite a few lesser men, and Montesquieu. It is hard to find a formula which would be exactly true of every one of these leading penmen, but it is nevertheless true that there is a kind of kinship which shows the true situation of this century. Rousseau's rebellion against this lowering of the standards, that was taken up in all countries. But the most famous men to stand on the shoulders of Rousseau were the great German philosophers, especially Kant and Hegel, who tried to develop an order which would be a synthesis, if I may use this favorite term of Hegel, of the *polis* and the seventeenth- eighteenth-century state and would surpass both in true freedom and in virtue. One would have to take this very seriously, of course. Whether it is justified is another matter.

Student: And Marx too?

LS: By the way, Marx is in these respects a pupil of the ancients, but Marx is distinguished from the classics in the first place by one very massive thing: there is no *polis* in Marx. Marx believes you can have the just and virtuous society only in a single society embracing all men, not a *polis*; and secondly, no coercion. There was full agreement between the classics and the thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—including by the way Kant and Hegel—that the state, if I may use this term,[46] is a coercive society. If this is hard to understand, think of gallows. You must have seen such instruments from time to time. No society [is] possible without gallows or some such thing. That was the common opinion of all serious thinkers. Marx is the first important thinker who said: No, it is possible.[47] I will take it up another time. It has to do with the question: Is a truly rational society possible? If a truly rational society is a society in which each member is rational in fact, then you don't need coercion. Everyone

[lviii] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), part 1, paragraph 41.

will do the right thing without coercion; then you can have a classless society. But the tacit premise of the pre-Marxian thinkers, ancient and modern, was [that] there will always be irrational people and therefore there will always be [a] need for coercion. But even in this respect there is an interesting difference between the ancients and the moderns, which I will take up in a somewhat different context. Rabbi Weiss?

Rabbi Weiss: Could you explain more clearly the modern natural order of society?

LS: The invisible hand, a mechanism which leads to [the] happiness of society, and the only thing which governments should do is[48] keep their hands off: that is the natural order. If everyone is concerned with buying cheap and selling dear and similar things, and acts on that, that is the most important condition for a flourishing society. That presupposes something: you must have a government for the marginal cases. There are always people who forge checks and this kind of thing, but that is relatively trivial. The substance of the society is possible without any coercion. That is already long before Marx. Marx only drew the conclusion that, Why ask even [about] the checks, the false checks, the embezzlers, and the murderers? That [such people exist] is ultimately not because they are by nature corrupt fellows or defective. That doesn't exist. They are the victims of a bad order of society. If we have the perfectly rational order, these people would be usefully employed. There would be no frustration, or whatever people might say today.

Student: When you referred to a system of passions without restraint, were you referring to avarice?

LS: Sure. Not all the passions. I mean, one must use common sense. The great discovery was the virtue of avarice. That was in Rousseau. Even Edmund Burke, who is so close in his principles to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, accepted this great principle of lucre, as he called it, from Adam Smith without any reservations,[49] but it is not limited to that, because—[recall] the statement which I quoted to you some time ago about Kant's doctrine regarding lying. The natural right of freedom as Kant understands it implies the right to lie. The right to lie is parallel to the right to unlimited acquisition, and that one may use what one has acquired as one sees fit without any consideration for other people, that is strictly parallel. Yes?

Student: Doesn't the invisible hand give the moderns an objective view of happiness?

LS: A public happiness, yes.

Student: I still don't understand why you put them in the "no" category on objective happiness.

LS: I am a bit tired and can't think well. What does this mean? What does this capitalist principle, as it is sometimes called, mean?[50] Look at any advertisements on TV or [in] a newspaper. What is the principle underlying the advertisement? The objective good of the merchandise produced for the individuals who are to buy it? The satisfaction of

natural needs? No. Needs are created by advertising. The indefiniteness of happiness is implied in that. The public happiness in the sense that the society should be affluent and should be stable, and all these kinds of things, that is admitted. But that is only a means, the real thing is the private happiness.

By the way, that is interesting regarding Marx.[51] Marx of course asserts by implication that private happiness and public happiness coincide necessarily in the good society, i.e., in a communist society. I am happy by being fully collectivized, that is clear. That is the thesis. Some people believed that until they came across Freud, who told them that this is not necessarily true: there is really a problem of private happiness in spite of public happiness. Present-day social science, surely in the case of Harold Lasswell, tries to reconcile these two things by a combination of Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis: public happiness, the welfare state; private happiness, the couch. I don't believe that Lasswell can admit the possibility of private happiness . . . But that would lead me too far. Good. So next time we will continue.

---

[1] Deleted "that."
[2] Deleted "of"
[3] Deleted "But."
[4] Deleted "is."
[5] Deleted "now."
[6] Deleted "you call it also."
[7] Deleted "well."
[8] Deleted "give."
[9] Deleted "so."
[10] Deleted "they."
[11] Deleted "human beings."
[12] Moved "if they are beyond a certain number," and deleted "so to speak."
[13] Deleted "and."
[14] Deleted "the."
[15] Moved "way."
[16] Deleted "the polis or tribe or city."
[17] Deleted "a."
[18] Deleted "theme."
[19] Deleted "he."
[20] Deleted "that"
[21] Deleted "Now."
[22] Deleted "that."
[23] Deleted "but."
[24] Deleted "that he does not do"
[25] Deleted "not."
[26] Deleted "gives."
[27] Deleted "it."
[28] Deleted "to."
[29] Deleted "which is here only."
[30] Deleted "That what."
[31] Deleted "their."
[32] Deleted "there are developed."
[33] Deleted "the."
[34] Deleted "the."
[35] Moved "Plato's."
[36] Moved "or the *Protagoras*."
[37] Moved "here."

[38] Deleted “what”
[39] Deleted “both.”
[40] Deleted “gave.”
[41] Deleted “he”
[42] Deleted “the basis.”
[43] Deleted “who.”
[44] Deleted “you know.”
[45] Deleted “that”
[46] Deleted “that the state.”
[47] Deleted “Differently stated, no.”
[48] Deleted “to.”
[49] Deleted “That is now.”
[50] Deleted “It means of course.”
[51] Deleted “because that was brought up”

Session 9: October 30, 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: [1]So we are still trying to understand what *polis* means in Aristotle. "City-state" is an inadequate rendering, and I said its modern equivalent on the prephilosophic or the prescientific level is "the country." On the theoretical level, however, the equivalent is "the state," with this understanding: that when we speak of state, we make a distinction between state and society, a distinction alien to the classic concept of the city. And in order to make intelligible the distinction between the state and society, I referred to what in Aristotle's view is the end of the city, happiness; whereas the modern distinction between state and society can most simply be understood if we say that the state is concerned with securing the conditions of happiness, which are the same for all, [and] whereas happiness is radically subjective: everyone understands by happiness something else. Therefore the state is superior to society from one point of view, and society is superior to the state from another point of view. The state is superior to society because its end, the conditions of happiness, [is] objective: they are the same for all. On the other hand, this end of the state, the conditions of happiness, is only a means, and the realm of ends belongs entirely to the transpolitical sphere of society.

In developing this point I noted that this modern view was in a way foreshadowed by a view familiar to Aristotle, of which he speaks in the third book of the *Politics*, in 1280a25-35. According to that view which Aristotle knew, the purpose of the city is to enable its members to exchange goods and services by protecting them against violence among themselves and from foreigners, while it is not concerned at all with the moral character of its members. It is only concerned with guaranteeing peace and peaceful exchange but not with moral character, whereas from Aristotle's point of view a *polis* as *polis* must be concerned above all with the moral character of its members. Now this view which Aristotle reports has something in common with the description given in Plato's *Republic* of what is there called the city of pigs, namely, a society which is sufficient for satisfying the natural needs of the body, food, shelter, and so on,[2] i.e., that which is by nature private. I have discussed briefly, and I cannot repeat that now, what the differences are between the classical views foreshadowing the modern view and the modern view itself. I merely say that society as distinguished from the state comes first to sight as the market, in which competitors buy and sell. The market requires the state as its protector, or rather its servant, the policeman. Now once this is admitted, it will finally come about that the political will be understood as derivative from the economic, which in its extreme form is the Marxist view.

But there is another side to the matter which I will now develop. The actions of the market by themselves are voluntary. That is of their essence, whereas the state coerces within the limits within which the state is active. Yet voluntariness is not a preserve of the market. Voluntariness is of the essence of virtue, at least of genuine virtue as

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 30-35 and 35-41.

distinguished from merely utilitarian virtue. Now from this fact it was inferred in modern times that since virtue cannot be brought about by coercion, the promotion of virtue cannot be the business of the state, not because virtue is unimportant but because of its sublimity, the loftiness of virtue. For this reason the state must be indifferent to virtue and vice as distinguished from the transgression of the state's laws, which have no other function than the protection of life, liberty, and property of each. Here you have a reversal. Society is not lower than the state because it is concerned only with the satisfaction of the wants or needs of each, but it is higher because it deals with virtue and the state cannot be concerned with virtue as such. But there is a certain difficulty in this argument, which was very powerfully stated by Milton in the *Areopagitica*,[ii] namely, this: Is virtue simply voluntary? Must virtue not be acquired through a process of habituation or education, and does this not very well fall within the province of civil society? That is a great question, but however this may be, the consequence of this view is that virtue and of course also religion must be private, in no way an affair of civil society, or that society as distinguished from the state is the sphere less of the merely private in the narrow sense than of the voluntary. If this is so, then society embraces not only the subpolitical, the economic, but the suprapolitical as well. The suprapolitical: art, morality, science.

Now this of course is the generally accepted view, but because this hands over to society the highest human concern, it is not properly called any more society but is called civilization, or rather culture. And from this point of view we may say that the true modern equivalent of the *polis* is culture as it is now understood. Now on this basis the political must be understood as derivative from the culture. Culture is the matrix of the state. Of course the term "culture" is in itself a very old term and means simply cultivation—of the soil, especially, agriculture. But then it came to be applied to the cultivation of the mind, and then culture without any addition means cultivation of the mind, not culture of the soil. That was the traditional view. But what happened in the nineteenth century was that culture, which had hitherto been used only in the singular, came to be used also in the plural: cultures. And it is only culture as susceptible of being used in the plural with which I am now concerned, and culture as susceptible of being used in the plural is the highest modern equivalent of the city.

Now this term culture, as I said, emerged in the nineteenth century. It had certain foreforms which we must briefly consider. They occur especially in Hegel. Hegel however does not yet speak of cultures, but he speaks of folk minds or of *Weltanschauungen*. That is a German word which is frequently used as a formal word in English, as some of you will know. Now, literally translated, *Weltanschauung* means a worldview, a comprehensive view of everything, and this comprehensive view was thought to differ from historical epoch to historical epoch. But still we can say [in retrospect] that what Hegel is driving at[3] is something like the present-day concept of culture as susceptible of being used in the plural. Now in its original form, culture[4] was thought to have its originating core in religion. I quote Hegel: "Religion is the place where a nation gives itself the definition of what it regards as the truth."[iii] And on the

[ii] John Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644).
[iii] Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1837), sec. 51.

basis of this overall view a nation then also has a specific view of what the right kind of society is, and also therefore of what the right kind of political association is. But that follows from that overall view. The political is derivative from the cultural, as I stated it before.

Now I would like to illustrate this from an English document, a statement by Edmund Burke, in the[5] *Letter[s] on a Regicide Peace*.[iv] We find this remark [in his first letter]:

> There have been periods of time in which communities, apparently in peace with each other, have been more perfectly separated than, in later times, many nations in Europe have been in [the] course of long and bloody wars. The cause must be sought in the similitude throughout Europe of religion, laws, and manners. At bottom, these are all the same. The writers on public law have often called this aggregate of nations a Commonwealth. They had reason. It is virtually one great state having the same basis of general law, with some diversity of provincial custom and local establishments. The nations of Europe have had the very same Christian religion, agreeing in the fundamental facts,[v] varying a little in the ceremonies and in the subordinate doctrines. The whole of the polity and economy of every country in Europe has been derived from the same sources . . . From hence arose the several orders, with or without a Monarch, which are called States, in every European country.[vi]

He follows this up: here we have a sketch, a pretheoretical sketch of what came to mean a culture. Look at a map of eighteenth-century Europe—and the same would be true today—these are independent political societies: France, Germany, and so on, and yet they have something in common which transcends the political and which is in a way more important than the political and yet affects the political in various ways. Here you have a complete example of what a culture means. It would be interesting to find out whether the concept of culture, to be susceptible of being used in the plural, is not derivative from such an experience as the European, as Europe. You can also include the United States here, which seems to show very clearly that the political as political cannot be the highest on the level of human society.

Now if one would analyze this fact to which Burke refers, one would of course see that ultimately, as he partly implied, this is still a political association. This whole complex of states held together by a culture was originally understood as a *Respublica Christiana*,[6] a Christian commonwealth, and subject to a single government which consisted of two parts, a power temporal and a power spiritual, but with the power spiritual occupying the higher position. In other words, it is a question whether this analysis of this culture would not lead us back eventually to a particular kind of political association. However this may be, in the view of culture which emerged in the early nineteenth century, where Hegel is especially important, the core of culture was thought to be the religion of a given society.

[iv] Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796).
[v] In original: “parts”
[vi] Burke, *Letters*, 73-74.

Now here we come across the most fundamental difference between Aristotle and the modern equivalent. According to Aristotle too, the concern with the divine occupies somehow the first place among the concerns of the city. He says so. But he makes this remark [about] this concern with the divine things in an enumeration of the functions of the *polis*: the concern with the divine things is the fifth and the first.[vii] This is an ambiguous statement. In one respect it is the first, and in another respect it is the fifth. Now what does he mean? The concern with the divine which occupies a place of honor among the concerns of the city is the activity of the priesthood, a citizen priesthood, whereas the true concern with the divine is the knowledge of the divine, that is to say transpolitical wisdom, which deals with the cosmic gods and not with the Olympic gods, if I may say so, the objects of the cults in the Greek cities. This is, I think, the key issue: What is the position of what we call religion, or what Aristotle calls concern with the divine things, in the *polis*? And from Aristotle's point of view, either this concern is of the highest level, namely, it is the same as philosophy—and then it is altogether transpolitical and is not capable of finding any organizational expression, except a private school as Aristotle founded and as Plato founded—but in the other sense, if it is a public cult then it is by its nature subject to the *polis*. This is the answer of Aristotle on this point. Here we would have to go into the long history of religion and the state, church and the state, to understand the fundamental difference between the modern and the Aristotelian point of view.

However this may be, [in] the relation between the concept of city and the concept of culture as now used, culture as used now differs from the original notion of culture decisively because it no longer implies an order of rank among the various elements of culture, whereas in the original notion, as exemplified by Hegel, the core of a culture is the religion. According to the view now prevailing in anthropology, a culture consists of *n* elements, and there is no essential difference [between] and no hierarchy among these elements. Now from this point of view which prevails today, Aristotle's assertion that the political is the highest or the most authoritative element in human society must appear to be an arbitrary preference, or at best an expression of one culture, the Greek culture, among many. The view according to which all elements of culture, folklore, economy, technology, government, manners, and so on—the view according to which all elements of culture are of equal rank is meant to be adequate for the description or analysis of all human societies present or past.

Yet this view of the equality of all elements appears to be the product of a particular culture, modern Western culture, and it is by no means certain that it is useful for the understanding of other cultures, [nor] whether it does not do violence to these other cultures. After all, these other cultures, whether present in other climes or past, even in the West, must be understood as they are in themselves and not be forced into a Procrustean bed supplied by the experience of modern Western man in the last few generations. It would seem that each culture must be understood in the light of that to which that culture looks up, and every culture looks up to something. No culture is simply egalitarian, i.e., that it has nothing in particular to which it looks up. That to which

[vii] *Politics*, book 7, 1329b2 ff.

it looks up may appear to it to become reflected in the particular kind of human beings [it looks up to], and this kind of human being may be the ones who rule that society in broad daylight. Now this special case—that that to which a society looks up is represented by a specific human type who rules that society in broad daylight—this special case is the case which Aristotle regarded as the normal case. Therefore his analysis of any culture, as I now use the term, would be a political analysis, because it would show which type of men is predominant in that society and what is the peculiar objective of that type. The question is whether this was not only Aristotle's prejudice or whether there is something to this. The view according to which all elements of a culture are of equal rank—we may say that is the egalitarian view of culture—reflects an egalitarian society. But what is an egalitarian society? There is a certain difficulty. An egalitarian society looks also up to something. An egalitarian society derives its character from looking up to equality and ultimately to a universe which does not consist of essentially different parts, and which therefore looks up to such uncommon men as devote themselves to the service of the common man. You know that the very extreme Democrats who followed Henry Wallace[viii] were compelled to entitle their biography of Henry Wallace, *Henry Wallace: An Uncommon Man*.[ix] It is still more striking in the personality cult, as Khrushchev has called it,[x] in the allegedly most egalitarian country, Soviet Russia. So in other words, that is a question: whether, if we look more deeply into the matter we are not compelled in analyzing any culture to see what does this culture look up to, and is this looking up to not necessarily expressed in an order of society, in a preference legally defined or not legally defined, [7][for] a specific type of human being? And this is the phenomenon with which Aristotle was primarily concerned.

There was a parallel to what we now call anthropology in classical antiquity. There were travelers who tried to understand other tribes or nations. The most famous example is of course Herodotus. Now it is interesting to see the categories that Herodotus employed in looking at a tribe and to compare these categories with that of present-day anthropology. Herodotus studies the various nations with a view to four things: [First], the nature of the land and its inhabitants: Is it mountainous, seaside, and so on? Are the inhabitants vigorous? Second, their arts or crafts; third their laws, written or unwritten; and fourth, their stories or accounts, because you do not find laws written or unwritten anywhere without a rationale for them which explains why they are, [and] these are the stories or accounts. In this scheme, the political element is not manifestly predominant or the most authoritative or the highest. So in other words, the Greeks were aware of the fact of an understanding of society which is not predominantly, or at least not obviously, political. We may say this is a descriptive approach to society. In contradistinction to this descriptive approach, Aristotle's approach is practical. He sees the various societies as they appear when one is guided by the question of the good society. Then these societies, or any society, come to sight as attempting to answer the question of the good society.

[viii] Henry Wallace (1888-1965): 33rd Vice President of the United States, nominee of the Progressive Party in 1948 presidential election.

[ix] Frank Kingdon, *Henry Wallace and 60 Million Jobs* (New York: The Readers Press, 1945).

[x] Khrushchev delivered a speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union in February of 1956, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," in which he denounced Stalin's crimes and the "cult of personality" that surrounded him.

How did they answer this question? Now if a society is approached from this practical point of view, then the nature of the land, the nature of the inhabitants, to some extent even the arts and the accounts appear as conditions, and only the political order as such as intended. This, I believe, is the difference between Aristotle's analysis and a descriptive analysis.

Now this much about the first point which I tried to make clear, the concept of *polis* and its modern equivalent. And I said that the highest modern equivalent of *polis* is culture as now used, and I tried to explain that. I am sure there are quite a few points which are in need of further explanation. Here is the occasion. I see someone shaking their head. Do you seem to have special difficulty? No? Yes, Mr. Seltzer?

Mr. Seltzer: I just want to clarify one point. In Aristotle's approach, the political becomes predominant and the rest of Herodotus would become conditions. Does he mean that the stories that were told also become conditions?

LS: In a way, yes. You see that the picture changes immediately if you look at the tribe or nation or culture not as something which you observe as you would observe lions or even works of art or whatever it may be, but if you look at them as human beings who try to answer the question, What is the good society?, then the focus is different. From this point of view one can say that Aristotle's approach is practical. Today they would say existential, but let us use an old word which at least by virtue of old age has ceased to be highfalutin' or pretentious, namely, the question concerning one's self, which concerns every thinking being. What is the good society? How did they conceive the good society? How did they answer the question? Then of course the natural conditions are obviously only conditions, but the same would also be true of other things.

Student: Would you expound a bit on the consequences of this different approach—

LS: That is of course a very provisional statement. One would have to go into the very difficult question of what Herodotus's argument is driving at . . . The purpose of Herodotus is to explain the secular conflict between Greece and Asia. The most massive manifestations of that were wars, and that is not entirely unpolitical.

Student: I think I understand what you said, but I don't grasp the implications of it.

LS: I think what one has to consider is a point which I have raised more than once: Is the notion of culture as it is now used—and it is in a way the center of anthropology and also of other social sciences—is this an accurate concept? . . . By the way, that has many practical consequences, because how can there be a genuine understanding between the various cultures in the world now on our shrinking globe if the cultures do not understand each other at their depths? For practical purposes, you can say that the underdeveloped countries need more money and more materials, and we want them not to line up with Soviet Russia. That is enough. But that fails in many cases, and perhaps it fails because we do not understand these other people. And one would have to go into their depths, [to] that which they regard as the highest and which does not necessarily come out in a flying

trip, meeting a member of such a different culture who also has become, perhaps, Westernized and presents the whole thing sincerely but mistakenly in Western terms . . . for our own understanding. Generally speaking, there is some truth to that, that a given culture does not understand itself if there are no terms of comparison, if the people don't know others. So for our own self-understanding it is important that we get rid of this simplistic notion of culture which is the outcome much more of the social development of the West than of theoretical reflections. That is one point which I wanted to make. But the focus is of course to make clear that by trying to understand Aristotle's concept of *polis*, which is to begin with truly alien to ourselves, that is a point where Collingwood is right, that this is not merely an antiquarian business to find out but that it is necessary for the clarification of our own guiding concepts.

Student: I understand this, but now then let us suppose that we take Aristotle's approach to other cultures. My question is: So what? Does this change our approach or what comes of it? What consequences does this change of approach lead to?

LS: To a very general question one can only give a very general answer: to a better understanding. I would say we would have to take specific examples to get out of this generality.

Student: Could you be more specific about how you would go about determining what a society feels to be its overall purpose? Is there any necessity that this purpose be conceived as political?

LS: That is another question. One must be absolutely open-minded. Maybe the purpose is not political. That you can say is Aristotle's specific assertion, that if you come down to brass tacks, it will be political. But maybe that is not universally so. That is another matter. Now I will give you an example. In present-day political science and sociology, people frequently talk of principles of legitimacy, and the most powerful school today, that is to say Max Weber—the three types of legitimacy, you must have heard: rational, traditional, and charismatic. And people believe that these are useful for understanding. I believe they are utterly useless. Why is that? What is the Aristotelian analysis, if I may say so, as distinguished from the Max Weberian? It is this: in order to find out what the principle of legitimacy in a given group is, you have to ask these people. You cannot use a schema invented by some sociologist like Max Weber and apply it. Now what would be the result of such a simply commonsensical procedure? Well, you would find—for example, take the United States and proceed in the most simple, childlike manner. You have laws, and the laws have an ultimate foundation. They must be consistent with the Constitution. All right, but what about the Constitution? What legitimates the Constitution? It is still a law. What legitimates the Constitution? What would you say?

Student: I would say that authority over time has been accepted.

LS: Does the Constitution say so?

Student: No.

LS: What does the Constitution say about the legitimating principle? Does it say anything about rational or charismatic, or for that matter, anything about tradition? It says in the beginning: "We the people." Don't underestimate that. Not all political orders have been established by the people and derived their ultimate legitimation from that. That may be very vague for us; originally it was very definite. And every one of you knows something from the history of the older Western countries. What was the alternative to the people? The divine right of kings, for example. If you look at that you see immediately that it is not a meaningless expression. Sure, "the people" is indeterminate and therefore the people can be understood on the basis of severe property qualifications and other discriminatory principles. It can also exclude all discriminatory principles. Here you have a whole rainbow all the way from oligarchy up to a very extreme democracy. That is the true history of the United States, how it changes from originally a very limited people to people as now understood . . .

Now what I am driving at is this. There are substantive principles of legitimacy, and these were always the great words used in the great historical movements, in the revolutions. However much hypocrisy was there, hypocrisy alone is impotent. There was always something more there: these were the principles of legitimacy, and that is what Aristotle had in mind. Aristotle believed he had an exhaustive scheme, by saying democracy, for example, that means freedom and equality; oligarchy means wealth; aristocracy means virtue or good birth. These are the substantive principles of legitimacy, that which gives dignity to the laws and all interactions within the society. If you say Hitler's Germany was a charismatic society because it looked up to Hitler—the same is of course true of Italy, and in a way the same is true of Leninist–Stalinist Russia, [where] there are also charismatic leaders, but that doesn't tell you anything. But if you do the simple thing and ask: Well, what was the principle of the Nazis, what was the principle of Fascism, what is the principle of communism? These are the principles which, in spite of the element of swindle and humbug, nevertheless tell you something very definite about it—in other words, the principles used by politically acting men and not the principles which an outside observer on the basis of principles which as such are never in the foreground of discussion. For example, take traditional and rational, which is part of Weber's scheme. Of course you could say that the *ancien régime* fought by the French Revolution was based on prescription, and what the revolutionaries tried to do was [to implement] the rational order, the order according to nature. But that is not precise enough, because ultimately the principle of the *ancien régime* was not prescription: prescription was a category to which Burke fell back in interpreting the French Revolution. That was not the intrinsic principle of the *ancien régime*; that was of course the sacredness of the monarchy, of the absolute monarchy and what went with it of the feudal order were the substantive principles, not the formal principles. This would be one example of what I have in mind.

Student: In the light of what you have now said, I understand the example which you gave earlier, the egalitarian society. But I thought you said that in this society people are not looking up to equality—

LS: No, no, I said they look up to equality, sure. I wanted to make clear that it is absolutely impossible to live without looking up to something. Surely for a society—I mean, I don't know if Al Capone looked up to something, but I believe he did, in a way, namely, to an image of Al Capone. But a society always must look up because there must always be something to which you refer. I mean, if people say that is Fourth of July oratory, that may very well be true in many cases, but it is not simply true. Let us say there is always cant and hypocrisy; but the difference of the cants have something to do with the real differences of societies. You know this kind of false sophistication when one says, "Well, lip-service doesn't mean anything." It means very much, and it is surely that from which any analysis would have to start. That was formally stated in the principle of Aristotle's approach. That doesn't mean of course that Aristotle was right. He believed that if you start from what is uppermost in people's mind, you will see the supremacy of the political. That he asserted. That must be questioned, of course.

Student: You used the example of Henry Wallace. They are looking not to the common man but to the champion of the common man. Is their principle equality or an uncommon man?

LS: Say equality is the highest principle, but by being a principle it acts as a principle of discrimination, namely, of those who are true egalitarians. Fully consistent. Simple egalitarianism without any qualification is impossible, by which I do not mean that there must be legal discriminations. That is an entirely secondary matter. But it is impossible to live without making a choice, and that is not true only of individuals but also the society as a whole must make a choice, and it always has made a choice because it always has some constitution.

Student: It seems to me, though, that it would be basically incorrect to say that the modern view differs from all other views in that it holds all elements of culture to be of equal rank. Modern anthropology could be considered as a set of procedures; it doesn't really hold that all things to which these procedures are applied are of equal rank because that is what has to be determined. That is what gets them into questions of intensity, for example, the intensity with which two individuals may hold attitudes toward civil liberties, for example, so that all they're saying in terms of equal rank is that the procedures must be applied equally.

LS: The only thing which is absolutely essential and constitutive of science is the method, as distinguished from any results. Yes?

Student: Well, not necessarily, because method may differ. The method for measuring intensity, for example, may differ. Sometimes measuring intensity can be done quantitatively by very refined methods, and on other occasions it is only a hazard. A psychological attitude, for example, can't be measured very accurately. There are other kinds of measurements of intensity that can be very accurate.

LS: All right, then, let me try to state it this way. Is it not characteristic of present-day social science to be multicausal, in contrast, for example, to Marxism, which says that the

economic element or the element of the form of production is the basic thing, and other spiritualistic schools which would say that the key element is religion. Modern social science says: No, we leave this open; [there are] *n* factors and any of them may be predominant in principle, this depends on the individual case. Is this not what they say?

Student: Well, they're equal in principle, but they are the objective to be determined.

LS: But the concept of society which guides it implies the equality. Society as such leaves it undetermined which is superior. In individual societies there is always something preponderant, and we have to find out which it is.

Student: At least one way we try to understand is to try to find common principles, uniformities in our experience and in our history. Whether or not we agree that Weber has found these general types of legitimacy in his look at human experience and history, isn't there something to be said for his effort to find these common factors?

LS: The question is not only whether they are these [types], as Weber said, but whether they can be of this character, and I contend that they cannot be of this character. People do not fight in principle over charismatic, traditional, or rational, but only over substantive things. Another point which one must consider is the origin of Weber's distinction. It was originally this. In nineteenth-century Europe, after the French Revolution, the fight between the new social order and the *ancien régime* could be understood as that between reason versus tradition. And then there was a third element, however, in between the French Revolution and the Restoration: there was an individual called Napoleon. That wasn't rational or traditional—charismatic. In other words, what I believe is the Weberian scheme reflects a certain experience of Western Europe in the nineteenth century. The experimental basis is very narrow. How can you expand that? Men are ingenious and can do the impossible, but how can you reasonably, with any hope of success, expand that? That is the question.

Student: If, as you admit, all societies consciously or unconsciously have an image of a man it holds desirable, then why should this task be political? Why can't it be the task of society?

LS: Sure it can. The question is: Is not—if a society has, as you put it, an image of a man, is this preferred type not more determinative of society if that type rules society in broad daylight? Is it a mere accident that the preference for the human type, a moral preference, finds its expression in a political order corresponding to that? Or is it mere accident? Aristotle would say that the normal case would be the one if the preferred type rules the society, puts his stamp on it. Surely there can be other societies, there is no question. But are they not complex forms, in a way abnormal forms? That must be the question.

Student: According to this analysis, why would it necessarily be the political rather than the religious or economic leadership that represents what the society holds highest?

LS: To begin with, why not? But if you look around and see what is uppermost in the mind of everyone who is not completely engrossed with his own sleep, digestion, and other things, there is one theme observed which I believe is of the greatest concern to everyone—each may also have high concerns of his own, but of everyone—and I think I can say what it is now. It is illustrated by such individual happenings as Berlin.[xi] But that is only at the moment; the broader thing is called the Cold War, and if you go into that, what is the Cold War, it is a state of antagonism between the United States and Soviet Russia. That is an empirical statement. But if you look more closely you will see that it is not sufficient if you think only of two big political societies. The crucial point is that these two different societies have different regimes, have a dedication to different overall objectives of the two societies. I think that today very few people would [not] admit that the most urgent and burning problem with which we are confronted is this conflict between two political societies characterized by a difference of regimes, political orders. This is what Aristotle means. If you would look, for example, at the Greece of classical times, the greatest and the biggest event there was surely the Peloponnesian War, where you had, instead of the United States and Soviet Russia, Athens and Sparta, which were not merely two different cities but which were two cities characterized by different regimes—i.e., that is not merely a difference of legal technicalities but [a matter of] being dedicated to different ends. In other words, there surely are periods in human history when the most burning and the most comprehensive issues are of this character, as Aristotle says.

But if you say: Well, there are also other periods, Islam and Christianity are not simple political associations. And here you could say the emphasis was entirely religious. Sure, that exists. Therefore, the true difference between our concept of culture and the Aristotelian concept of *polis* is [that] in the *polis*, the religious as religious is either entirely suprapolitical, identical with philosophy, or it is subpolitical; whereas according to the modern concept of culture in its original and richest meaning, the religious is the central phenomenon. But you see that this is not an entirely arbitrary selection of the political. And if one reads the good Marxist literature which once existed, one sees that they, of course, while they say the ultimately driving thing are the changes in the modes of production, but the interesting moments are the political moments. For example, in Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, when he speaks about the economic strikes in Russia in early 1917—women, hungry women, bread, strikes, nothing but hunger—but then he points out that from this moment on the strike became political, then it became interesting. In other cases, it would be simply a matter of jailing these women or giving them some bread, and that would be the end of it. But in the moment it became political it became a question: Will these people still further accept the established regime or go out for a new regime? However important the economic, the technological, may be for Marx or for the Marxist doctrine, in the key moment, in the key moments these antagonisms become political, where they concern the question, which type of human being is to be authoritative in society: is it the landlord, is it the bourgeois, is it the proletarian? To this extent—I mean in this part, Marxist doctrine is not opposed to the Aristotelian, only Aristotle would say Marxism is completely misleading because it assumes there can ever

[xi] The construction of the Berlin Wall began in August 1961, only a few months before this class session.

be a human association which is not political—you know, the withering away of the state. Aristotle would say: If the state cannot wither way, there will always be a predominant type. This predominant type may be the majority, the common man. That is one special case, but it is a predominant type. I come back to this question later.

Student: If there is a predominant type, which is a problem, do you assume there is a stable purpose for the society or the culture, or is this changing all the time?

LS: There are minor changes, but the point is that fundamentally a given type corresponds to a given end.

Student: Assuming this to be true, where you've got regimes constantly changing, does it mean—

LS: What does it mean, the regime is constantly changing?

Student: In the cases cited by Aristotle, where a particular city-state or *polis* would have changes from dictatorship—

LS: Oh, the city changes, not the regime changes. I take this up at some length later. Now if you don't mind, this will be the last question on this subject. Yes?

Student: On what basis did Aristotle think it normal that this type man was the political man? Also, why do you emphasize the phrase that he rules in broad daylight? As compared to what?

LS: That was a tacit polemic against some supercilious and sophisticated people who say that the people whom we say rule, say it is the Kennedy Administration or the Eisenhower Administration, are only figureheads, the people who truly rule are the trade unions in one case or General Motors in the other. Have you ever heard that? What Aristotle has in mind is the clear case, which is much more frequent than people think. For example, in old Prussia the king and the ruling nobility ruled the country in broad daylight. You could see it by just looking at the names of the people occupying the key positions. Politics is in this respect in no way recondite, an esoteric affair.[xii]

I remind you of the general scheme which I used. Aristotle's political science is a presentation of the commonsense view. One objection was: Well, that is Greek common sense, not human common sense simply. A subdivision of this objection was that this was Greek upper-class common sense, i.e., Aristotle views political things from an antidemocratic prejudice. Now first a point of simple clarification: Aristotle was an antidemocrat. I don't wish to conceal this for a single moment. I believe it is very unwise to proceed as some people seem to do who admire both democracy and Aristotle and then draw the inference: hence Aristotle was a democrat. That doesn't follow. That only proves our innate human character, that we want to eat our cake and to have it, which is a very amiable quality, but in classrooms at least not to be tolerated. So Aristotle was an

[xii] The tape was changed at this point.

antidemocrat. The democracy with which he takes issue is the democracy of the city, not the modern democracy, and we must see for one moment what the key differences are. The modern democracy is a kind of democracy which presupposes the distinction between state and society. The democracy of the city excludes that distinction. Furthermore, the democracy of the city is characterized by the presence of slavery. Citizenship is a privilege, not a right. The democracy of the city did not allow the claim to the freedom of man as man but only of the free man, and in the last analysis, only the claim of men who are by nature free men and not merely by convention free men.

One definition Aristotle refers to is that a citizen is a man who is descended from a citizen father and a citizen mother. This is a very crude definition, but it surely indicates that it is not man as man. Now what is a free man? The free man is distinguished from the slave by the fact that he lives as he likes. The slave doesn't live as he likes; he has to go there or wherever his master sends him. The claim to live as he likes is raised for every free man equally, it is not only for this particular free man. The free man refuses to take orders from any one or to be subject to any one. He is his own master, whereas the slave is a man who has a master. But government is obviously necessary, and therefore the free man must admit some form of subjection. The free man therefore demands that he not be subject to anyone who is not in turn subject to him; then his subjection is not unworthy of a free man. That means that everyone must have as much access to the highest magistracies as everyone else merely because he is a free man. No qualification other than being a free man will be considered. The only way in which this can be guaranteed is election by lot, because in election by lot every man is equally considered to fulfill this requirement. The alternative to election by lot was called election by raising the hand—voting for a candidate, as we would say. Voting for a candidate is a discriminatory principle among free men. Do you see that? Because you consider not merely the fact that he is a free man, you consider also the fact that he deserves to be elected because of his merit and excellence. This is an aristocratic principle, and therefore what we call democracy, modern democracy as it is intended, would from Aristotle's point of view be a mixture of democracy and aristocracy. In fact, the Greeks had to dilute their water. There were two clear cases where they had to consider merit where it was really serious: generals, who were not elected by lot; and secondly, treasurers were not elected by lot because very funny things would happen if they were elected by lot. But still, the principle is interesting—for example, in the whole jury system and so on.

Since freedom as claimed by the democracy of the city means to live as one likes—that is the explicit definition given by Aristotle—democracy permits only a minimum of restraint on its members. It is permissive, as they say now, to the extreme. As Plato put it for this reason in th*e Statesman*, democracy, regardless of good or bad, is the weakest of all regimes, meaning least affecting and least interfering with the individual. Now one might find it strange that Aristotle does not allow for the possibility of a stern, puritan democracy. After all, that can exist. But I think he would say such an order is not a democracy proper; it is a theocracy which contains certain democratic institutions but in itself it is not a democracy.

Another thing also must be considered. Aristotle does not suggest any connection between the democracy of the city and that city which limits itself to enabling its members to exchange goods and services by protecting them against violence from within and from without. This is very strange. This Lockean possibility which he referred to, he does not link this up in any way with the democracy. That is interesting, very interesting. In other words, the democracy as Aristotle meant it is not an economic society. Of course it also has economic institutions, but it is not dedicated to them. The old spirit of the *polis* as a society of fighting men is, I think, much too powerful, [that] is my explanation. So this much for what Aristotle understood by democracy.

Now, but the difficulty. It could seem that democracy is not merely one form among many which the city may take but it is the normal form, or in other words, that the city by its nature tends to be democratic. The city as Aristotle understands it is or tends to be a society of free and equal men, but that would seem to be the essence of democracy. A city is the people or belongs to the people, and this would seem to require that it is ruled by the people. It comes out in a way more clearly in Latin, in Cicero's discussion of these things: the city, the commonwealth, *res publica*. What is *res publica*? *Res populi*, something which belongs to the people and then of course the people should treat it, as it were, as property. Now that there is a tendency of the city toward democracy comes out very remarkably in Aristotle's *Politics*. For instance, the third book of the *Politics*, which is the most important book: when Aristotle begins there the argument, the first argument is the democratic argument, as you can see when you look it up. The first definition of the citizen, which Aristotle suggests shortly thereafter, is a democratic definition. Aristotle then corrects the democratic definition, but that the first definition which suggests itself is the democratic definition is in itself of some interest. How is this to be understood? Let us take the two most simple alternatives to democracy, oligarchy and aristocracy. In contradistinction to them, democracy is the rule of all and not the rule of a part. Oligarchy and aristocracy exclude the common people from participation in government, whereas democracy does not exclude the wealthy and the gentlemen from participation in government. It seems to be that democracy is truly the rule of all.

Aristotle sees these things, but he disagrees with this analysis. According to him, the apparent rule of all in a democracy is in fact the rule of a part. All free men, I mean all men who are citizens, have an equal share in government in a democracy. Now how are controversies decided among equal people? There is only one way of doing that if there is to be deliberation. There can of course be unanimity, but that is an uninteresting case because then it is clear [that] no decision is needed. But if no unanimity, how then can you decide? You can decide by lot. Should there be war or peace? Let us throw a coin. Well, this is of course not very intelligent, because there is no place for deliberation and to throw the coin after deliberation seems to be absurd. So the only rational way of reaching decisions on the basis of deliberation and in the face of the lack of unanimity is the majority vote. Try to play with the alternative: the minority should win; and you see it doesn't work because everyone would vote against this opinion. The only rational system among equals is the vote of the majority.

And now we are confronted, as Aristotle observed, by a very strange coincidence: that while it is theoretically possible that in a given city the majority would be rich and the minority would be poor, it so happens that everywhere the opposite is true, the minority is rich and the majority is poor. So the simple consequence of this fact is that democracy is the rule of the poor. There can be complications, and these complications were the subject of profound reflections on the part of Madison, as you know from number 10, *Federalist* number 10, but in principle you know that, barring complications, democracy as the rule of the majority of the people is the rule of the poor. What does this mean? Democracy does present itself as the rule of all and not as the rule of the poor, at least in classical antiquity. Why is that so? Democracy bases its claim on freedom and not on poverty, because in classical antiquity I think it was tacitly taken for granted you cannot base a claim to rule on a defect or a need, but only on an excellence. In modern times it is frequently said the underdog doesn't have a chance if he doesn't have the right to vote. Aristotle would say that as underdog he should not raise any claim to participation in government. It must be a positive quality, and the positive quality being a free man which also means of course that he fights for the country. Titles to rule are more credible if based on an excellence rather than on a defect or a need. But on the other hand, if democracy is rule of the poor, it is the rule of those who lack leisure. And therefore it is the rule of the uneducated, because education requires leisure, and as such it is undesirable. That is Aristotle's simple argument in this place.

But there is a great difficulty. The many poor and uneducated may have all the terrible qualities of a mob—hysteria, madness—yet they have arms. They are to be reckoned with. And therefore the political problem is not solved by the trivial observation that only educated and rational men should rule. What is the solution, then? The *demos* must be considered because of its power, but on the other hand it is no good. And that may sound like a joke, but it is literally true. In the optimal scheme which Aristotle sketched in books 7 and 8 of his *Politics*, this is a city without a *demos*. There are the free men who have all undergone the proper education—the owners of the land and so on—and the other inhabitants of the territory are either metics, resident strangers, or slaves. This is of course only possible under very favorable conditions and not a very practical solution. Aristotle considers therefore a variety of less extreme solutions, of regimes in which the common people would participate without being predominant. And you can say this argument goes through books 3, 4, 5, 6. How to find such a solution? He comes closest to accepting democracy, at least in the case where the common people is not too depraved, in the third book. But if you look at this argument, it is very difficult to follow and has been the ruin of I believe everyone who has written on this subject, who has published books on this subject, because it is extremely involved, the argument. Aristotle develops an argument for democracy which is a somewhat qualified democracy but fundamentally democracy, and when you read it you say: Well, that's it, fair, reasonable, and that is what every sensible man would have if he could get it. And then Aristotle goes on and develops something entirely different. I cannot go into all the windings now.

And out of this other discussion there emerges an absolutely opposed possibility, and that is the absolute monarchy of the single superior man. There is no readily visible connection between these two parts of the argument. What does he mean? Why does

Aristotle—and this absolute monarchy which he describes is infinitely vaguer and less clear than what he said about[8] democracy—but there must be something in the case of a man like Aristotle which moves him away from a sensible solution. We must try to understand that. Now if we take into consideration all the other evidence we have, not only in the *Politics* but also in the *Ethics* and even in his *Metaphysics*, we would see that this king, a Zeus-like man who has the highest natural title to rule, a title much higher than any multitude can possess, a man of the highest self-sufficiency who therefore cannot be a mere part of the *polis* because of his completeness or wholeness, this is, it seems to me, if not the philosopher in the Aristotelian sense, then at least the highest political reflection of the philosopher.

What I am driving at is this. What induces Aristotle to be dissatisfied even with a perfectly qualified, satisfactory democracy is philosophy. That is the riddle of Aristotle's *Politics*. The difficulty is this. This king of whom he speaks, this perfect man, is of no political importance because, as Aristotle makes clear in other passages, the full monarchy, the absolute monarchy in the best sense is possible only at the beginning, at the dawn of civil society when they are founded. Philosophy on the other hand, at least in its completion, belongs rather to the dusk than to the dawn of civil society. There is a conflict, it would seem, between philosophy and the *polis*, or in particular the democracy. What is behind that? I suggest this answer. The ultimate reason why Aristotle has reservations against even the best democracy is his certainty that the *demos* as *demos* is by nature opposed to philosophy. Only the gentlemen, the upper class, can be open to philosophy, can listen to the philosophers. This, I believe, is irrefutable. And here we understand somewhat better the difference between the democracy of the city and modern democracy.

Modern democracy presupposes a fundamental harmony between philosophy and the people. And this harmony is thought to be brought about by universal enlightenment—public schools in the American sense, adult education and so on—either by enlightenment or else by philosophy or science relieving man's misery through inventions and discoveries which everyone can recognize as salutary. This, I believe, is of crucial importance. On the basis of the break with the Aristotelian view of everything, one came to believe in the possibility of a simply rational society, a society each member of which would be of necessity perfectly rational so that all would be united by fraternal friendship. And government of men, as distinguished from the administration of things, could wither away. This Marxist–anarchist form is of course only an extreme form. The form adopted by liberal democracy is of course a much more mitigated form, but both views agree over against Aristotle in the view that there is a fundamental harmony between philosophy and the demos, and this view is denied by Aristotle. Therefore, this is the ultimate reason why Aristotle has a fundamental reservation against democracy and does not even leave it at this very reasonable democracy—Athens at its best, one could say—which he reproduces in the third book of the *Politics*. I have to develop this theme of equality and inequality more next time. To repeat, one has to go back again beyond the merely political in order to understand Aristotle's *Politics*.

Let me state it differently, and that may be of some help for the discussion which we had before. The difficulty for us is to understand the seeming dogmatism with which Aristotle asserts that the political is the authoritative element. Why should it not be the economic, the artistic, the religious, or what have you? In other words, Aristotle must somehow establish the authoritative character of the political. Otherwise it would be sheer prejudice, although a very plausible prejudice, because as we see today from our brief presentation on liberal democracy and Athens–Sparta, there were situations where Aristotle was manifestly right. But that is not universally true. But how does Aristotle establish the supremacy, the authoritative character of the political? How does he do that? In which region would we find this discussion? And then I would say this discussion is identical with his discussion of philosophy. Aristotle contends that there is one and only one human activity which essentially transcends the *polis*, and that is the quest for truth, philosophy, or science—the distinction is not yet applicable in Plato and Aristotle. That is his contention, and that takes also the place of much of what we call religion. Aristotle's concern with the divine, or the highest form of the concern with the divine is knowledge of the divine, according to Aristotle, and that is philosophy or science. And whereas, as I said before, the cult, worship, prayer, and all this kind of things, they are for . . . the jurisdiction of the *polis*. If one does not understand what is for Aristotle the highest human perfection, one does not understand his overall view of the *polis*. This view—that there is a fundamental tension between philosophers and the *demos* or, generalized, between philosophy and the *polis*—is, I believe, essential to the Platonic–Aristotelian view of political philosophy. And it is clearly in contrast to the modern view which from the very beginning in various ways assumed the fundamental harmony between philosophy and the *polis*, either because philosophy is *propter potentiam*—for the sake of power, for the sake of benefit to human beings in the form of medicine, technology, and so on, and therefore manifestly acceptable to the mass of people—or because universal enlightenment will bring about a perfect agreement between the speculators and the mass of the citizens. Yes?

Student: In discussing the different approaches of Aristotle and Herodotus, you mentioned that Aristotle's preoccupation with the question of what is the good society . . . the expression of which is political organization, and in contradistinction to this you talked about Herodotus's descriptive method and the elements of the nature of man, accounts and stories, the conditions of the political. Now in your discussion of how Aristotle understood the relation of the demos and philosophy, it seemed that this problem of the nature of men was used as a point of departure of analysis rather than thought of as a condition of politics. Perhaps there is no distinction, but—

LS: Oh, yes, but as in other cases, one can solve this by a distinction—and I trust that the distinction which I make is not an ad hoc distinction by which I try to get myself out of a hold into which I inadvertently brought myself in what I said before. There are two kinds of accounts or stories: political accounts or transpolitical accounts. The transpolitical accounts are either philosophic or scientific accounts—[this] surely doesn't belong, strictly speaking, to the *polis* or to the culture in question. But the political account, the account which is used for buttressing the political society in question, that is of course in a way subpolitical.

Student: Well, in the descriptive account there was one element called the nature of man specifically—

LS: Sure, whether they were mountaineers; are they hardy people, tall people, short people, agile or the opposite—

Student: In other words, by nature of man he understands—

LS: The varieties, what kind of people are inhabiting this place.

Student: Rather than the categories which could be described as wealth or—

LS: That would also come in, that would surely have to be considered, but that would be derivative from (a) nature and from (b) art. I mean, how do people become wealthy? They are not by nature wealthy. Either they must have some form of cleverness and they must have some sources of wealth, crafts, commerce, or whatever it may be. Yes?

Student: But if Aristotle speaks of the state as having a specific end, something which is both self-sufficiency and good, how can he make a distinction about what is above that end and below that end, the subpolitical and the suprapolitical?

LS: I will try to explain that. Aristotle's *Politics* is not a simple book. It is not even simple in the way in which Hobbes's *Leviathan* can be said to be a simple book. Aristotle makes all kinds of experiments, not in the sense of modern physics but intellectual experiments. The city appears to begin with as it should appear to every one of us most of the time, as a thing which is majestic, impressive. After all, everyone is supposed to die for it, so the city must be something majestic. At first glance, the city seems to be the highest, at least to the people whom Aristotle addressed, and therefore he gives the *polis* all the characteristics of the highest. It is a whole of which every one of us is a part. It is by nature prior to the individual. An individual who is not a member of the *polis* (he doesn't go quite this far, I overstate it deliberately) is like a hand cut off from the body. Dead: no longer a hand, no longer a human being. And of course the end of the *polis* is happiness in the highest sense.

Now in the seventh book he discusses happiness of the individual and the *polis* explicitly, and it appears that the highest happiness is not that of practical life but of the theoretical life, hence the city must be a philosophic community. Aristotle does not draw this conclusion, but he suggests it to us. And then let us look at what happens, and you will see that Aristotle is fully aware of the fact that a city can never be a philosophizing community and there can only be a reflection of philosophizing in the best city. And what is that reflection? That the city is not imperialistic or expansionist, [it] is satisfied with its own. But the activity is of course not speculation or thinking. The highest type ruling the city are the gentlemen, [who] are very nice people. But what is the highest activity which is ascribed to them? And that is even somewhat unfair, but Aristotle doesn't go beyond that. What is it what they do? Of course they go to war and are politically active men, that

goes without saying. But Aristotle says that is only business, activity. But all business is for the sake of leisure. What do the gentlemen do in their leisure? And it is also made clear that leisure is not relaxation, because relaxation is lower than business, relaxation being only the breathing space between business. Leisure is higher: relaxation, business, leisure. Now what is the highest leisure activity of the gentlemen? That they listen to music, that they listen to the recital of poets, they look at paintings and statues, that is the maximum of speculation for the gentlemen. Now that is very nice and very good, but it is surely very far below that which Aristotle thought to be the highest activity of man. So you see the experiment with the view that the *polis* is higher than the individual simply fails. It succeeds to that extent: every human activity other than philosophy is inferior to the *polis.*

Student: Is there no attempt then in his thought to admit philosophy nonetheless needs to have certain physical sufficing?

LS: There is no question. That is exactly the difficulty. Philosophy cannot be without the *polis*. That is clear, and I think that even the history of philosophy throughout the ages would show that when philosophy was not urban, didn't have an urban basis, it was not philosophy in Aristotle's sense. I mean, the philosophy of the Middle Ages, the philosophy of the convents was not what Aristotle meant by philosophy. Only when cities became leading again in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where you had these city-slickers again, men like Descartes and the others—no, when you look at it, there is something to that. I mean, I like the countryside very much, but one must be fair. Philosophy needs the *polis*, and the *polis* also needs philosophy. That is of course shown beautifully by Plato more extensively than by Aristotle, but by Aristotle too. Very simple: the *polis* wants to be a good *polis*, wants to have the best laws and so on. But who can really give them the proper guidance towards the best? Philosophers. So the *polis*, if it understands itself, needs philosophy. While they need one another without any question, they are also in a tension. That, I think, is the characteristic thesis of classical political philosophy. In the tradition, including the present-day learned literature which claims to be critical of the tradition, this view has never been questioned. But I think it is nevertheless wrong and that a deeper understanding, not only of Plato and Aristotle but also of quite a few of the representatives of the tradition, if properly read, shows that this was always the view, that there is a tension between the two. I don't know whether I mentioned this in this class. I have to take it up in another connection, but I will already mention it now.

At the end of the *Ethics*, Aristotle makes a transition to the *Politics*. By the way, that is something you should all read, the last chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he shows why, in addition to the *Ethics*, a *Politics* is necessary. Now what is the argument there? [This is] the only passage where Aristotle speaks of an older form of political science, older than Plato and Socrates, and these people who were the first political scientists he calls by a name which will be familiar to you: the sophists. Now what did the sophists say regarding politics? They said political science is identical with rhetoric. And Aristotle said they are very wrong, not on the ground that rhetoric is superficial and is only the art of speaking and doesn't enter into the substance, which is also true, but that

is not the point which Aristotle makes. Aristotle gives another reason. He says this somehow presupposes that persuasion is sufficient for the guidance of the cities, the political multitude. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In the case of gentlemen, men who are by nature gentle and properly brought up, persuasion, praise, or abstention from praise would be sufficient, but not in the case of other men. There you need coercion. This is the objection of Aristotle to the sophists. It is very strange compared with the ordinary view of the sophists.

We have a parallel to that in Socrates. Socrates of course didn't write, and so we can have that only in Plato or in Xenophon. It so happens that this piece of information is in Xenophon. Xenophon told this story in his *Anabasis*, the story of his terrific exploits in Asia Minor. He was brought there by a friend called Proxenos, and Proxenos was a charming gentleman, a pupil of Gorgias, the leading teacher of rhetoric. And Proxenos was wonderful at ruling gentlemen when he only had to praise ("Well done!") or to abstain from praise—not even to say "Ill done," he needed to say nothing. But when he was confronted with the tough soldiers it was hopeless. Now then we have on the other side Xenophon, the pupil not of Gorgias but of Socrates, who was first-rate in both respects. He could rule gentlemen as well as non-gentlemen, the same thing as at the end of the *Ethics*. The true political science, the political science founded by Socrates, has understood the recalcitrance of the *polis* to reason and even to persuasion. That I think is the point which I believe is completely understated in the traditional and even the reigning view, though it is very clear if one reads the original authors. And because the *polis* is essentially recalcitrant to reason, while needing reason—that is the paradoxy of the *polis*—therefore there is a tension between the *polis* and philosophy, and therefore all anarchism or things approaching anarchism are absolute delusions. That I think is the most massive message of the classics. And that doesn't mean stupid toughness for toughness sake which every bully has, of course not, but it means that in spite of the reminders of the lofty aim of human life and of civil society we must never be oblivious of this rock-bottom resistance to reason, otherwise we will make terrible mistakes both as speculators and as political men. I have to take this up on a later occasion again, but I wanted to mention it already now so that you will understand.

To come back to this point: Aristotle does not dogmatically believe in the supremacy of the political life. He establishes it in this way. He establishes the supremacy of the political by an analysis of the relation of philosophy and society. The result is that philosophy, wisdom—which in another sense of the word of course excludes such things as poetry and sculpture, but let us not complicate things—philosophy or wisdom is the only thing that transcends the *polis*. Philosophy or wisdom is the only thing that transcends the *polis*. But apart from philosophy, the claim of the *polis* to supremacy is unchallenged. That is the Aristotelian view, which still doesn't have to be true. We have to examine it. But first of all, we must understand it.

---

[1] Deleted "Someone had a question last time at the end of the meeting, and I asked them to put it down here, but it has not turned up. So perhaps we get it next time. I don't know who it was."
[2] Deleted "the natural needs of the body."
[3] Deleted "we can say in retrospect."
[4] Deleted "was understood."

[5] Deleted “First.”
[6] Deleted “as.”
[7] Deleted “to”
[8] Deleted “this”

Session 10: 1 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: We are discussing Aristotle's posture toward democracy. This subject is important not only for us, the citizens of a democracy, but it is important from Aristotle's point of view because democracy, while being on the one hand one political order among many, is of special importance, as I indicated last time. I would like to give only one piece of corroborating evidence. In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, Callicles presents a political view which on the face of it is absolutely antidemocratic: the rule of the natural ruler who is by nature superior to everyone else, a tyrant. But Socrates says to Callicles: "You are a lover of the *demos*," and he contrasts himself with Callicles by saying of himself that he is a lover of wisdom. This fundamental cleavage between wisdom, philosophy on the one hand and the demos on the other is the ultimate basis also of Aristotle's attitude toward democracy, as I have tried to explain last time.

Now the question of democracy is of course inseparable from the question of equality, although Greek democracy as we have seen does not assert equality simply but only the equality of those who are free men. But nevertheless, the issue of equality unqualified came up already in classical antiquity. The Aristotelian view is that the ultimate justification of political inequality is natural inequality, and the counterthesis is of course that there is natural equality. Now I believe we begin our discussion best by reminding ourselves of the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, the most famous statement about equality.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. —That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

The Declaration says that men are created equal, i.e., that they are by nature equal, implying that all inequalities are due to human establishment. For example, the distinction between rich and poor: that presupposes the institution of property, a human institution. This view, that all men are by nature equal, goes back to a very old tradition from the Middle Ages, for example, in the famous verse "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"[ii] In other words, all men are descended from the

---

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 35-41 and 41-45.

[ii] In England in the fourteenth century, radical priest John Ball stirred up the peasant class in a revolt against their feudal landowners. In June 1381, he delivered a famous sermon to a band of

same couple and are therefore ultimately brothers: equals. The distinction between noblemen and women is a conventional distinction. Or the son of a king is born and dies in the same way as the poorest peasant. This view, as I say, is not only based on the biblical account that all men are descended from the same couple, it is also found in classical antiquity among people who did not make such an assertion of the descent of men from the same ancestors. If we turn to the Declaration: All men are equal. Equal in what respect? Because there are manifestly great inequalities and not merely political or social but also natural [ones]. I mean, some people are more beautiful than others, some are younger than others, and above all, some are more intelligent than others. The Declaration gives this answer: Surely they are equal in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights—you know, the enumeration is not meant to be complete; it says "among these are"—but these and similar rights are the natural basis. They are sufficient for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate governments or societies.

But a certain difficulty arises here. Thomas Jefferson himself said in a letter to John Adams, a very well-known letter [written] much later than he wrote the Declaration: "That form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for the pure selection of the naturally best into offices of the government."[iii] Now if they are naturally the best, there is natural inequality. The Declaration is silent about that, this . . . which is of course of utmost political importance. We can also take[1] another difficulty. Now what is to be done if, without any tyrannical action on the part of the government, many men's lives and happiness[2] [are] insecure because, say, of extreme scarcity? This question was clearly illustrated by Montesquieu in the following manner. Sir William Petty, perhaps the founder of political economy but surely a pupil of Thomas Hobbes, had figured out the value of a human being in monetary terms in connection with his political economy.[iv] And Montesquieu said to this: What Sir William has done is to find out how much a healthy slave fetches in the slave market in Algiers. That is a purely empirical matter. Montesquieu says that Sir William[3] figured out the value of an Englishman but not necessarily of another man, because there are countries where the value of a human being is much less and in some places even approaches zero, and in some cases even less than zero, you know, in a country where . . . or there is a famine.[v] Now this is a serious question: Are there not natural conditions in which the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness become meaningless, wholly independently of fundamental . . . ? In brief, one must say that the statement of the Declaration of Independence is incomplete, and I think that everyone would admit that.

But how do we complete it? How can we find the full reasoning behind these brief statements? I think also there is nothing secret about it. Everyone knows that the influence of John Locke is very powerful on this first page of this Declaration. And it is

---

rebels ready to march on London, asking "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"

[iii] Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 28 October 1813.

[iv] Sir William Petty (1623-1687). His main works on economics are *Treatise of Taxes and Contributions* (1662), *Verbum Sapienti* (1665) and *Quantulumcunque concerning money* (1682).

[v] Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws (*1748), 2.23.17.

also very well known that [there is] an interesting difference: Locke speaks of property, life, liberty, and property, and the Declaration speaks of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And it is not totally uninteresting, if I may say so in passing, to see where Jefferson got the notion of pursuit of happiness. By the way, Mason already did it in the Virginia Declaration of the Rights of Man.[vi] A writer on this subject, Chinard,[vii] I think he is at Princeton or at Johns Hopkins, made this very interesting observation. He said that this doesn't come from Europe because the Europeans, an old people, are much too sophisticated or languid to speak of happiness this way in which the young American frontier people believed in happiness. Unfortunately, I suppose there are even some people now who are not born Frenchmen who hold these views about the absolutely indigenous character of American political ideas.

The thing is a little bit more complicated. Among the famous writers on public law whom every educated American writer at that time knew, there was one called Christian Wolff (sometimes spelled with one f only),[viii] and he is mentioned by Jefferson in his letters and so on. Now as a matter of fact, the right of the pursuit of happiness is most clearly stated as a central conceit, one could say, of Wolff's natural right, and if I may illustrate it for one moment, although it is in a way not pertinent to my main subject, I think I should mention it because it shows how funny these things are. Now to illustrate what Wolff meant by the right to the pursuit of happiness, I give two examples. Man has by nature no right to defend the honor of God against blasphemers. There is no natural right to that; it can only be based on divine right. On the other hand, man has the natural right to adorn his body. In other words, the right to the pursuit of happiness has much more to do with the original versions of European rococo than with the American frontier. This only in passing. But surely, however important this particular point of the pursuit of happiness may be, Locke's influence is surely much more important and manifest there.

Now what does Locke teach? Locke also teaches the equality of man, but Locke is more precise as a theoretician, as he is bound to be. For Locke the fundamental right is the right of self-preservation, which expands into the right of comfortable self-preservation.[ix] Now all men are equal regarding the right of self-preservation, i.e., in the most important respect, and therefore their inequality in other respects is less important and can rightly be disregarded. But Locke is not as clear on this subject as his half-teacher, his disowned teacher Thomas Hobbes, and Hobbes teaches the equality of all men on the ground of self-preservation much more powerfully than Locke does. The Hobbean element is really amazing: all men are by nature equal because every man can kill everybody else.[x] The

---

[vi] George Mason, Virginia Declaration of Rights. The Declaration was adopted by the Virginia Constitutional Convention on June 12, 1776.

[vii] Gilbert Chinard (1881-1972), whose works included *Thomas Jefferson, The Apostle of Americanism* (1929) and *Honest John Adams* (1933). Chinard taught at Johns Hopkins early in his career and joined the faculty at Princeton in the late 1930s, where he remained until his retirement.

[viii] Christian Freiherr von Wolff (1679-1754), *Jus naturae methodo scientifica pertractatum*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt, 1740-1748).

[ix] Locke, *First Treatise*, sec. 87.

[x] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14.

weakest man can kill the strongest, of course, if he surprises him in his sleep, for example. But behind that is the power of harming and hurting, and the greatest harm is supposed to be killing. This establishes the fundamental equality which cannot be disregarded in any political consideration, and for Hobbes it means it is the most fundamental consideration.

There is something else which we must add. Granted that every man has equally the right to self-preservation, he has also the right to the means of self-preservation, otherwise the right would be futile. But then the question arises: What are the right means to self-preservation? And here error may very well be possible. For example, someone may very well believe that a certain instrument, a natural instrument, is good for killing his enemy; and it proves to be a broken reed—a most useless means for self-preservation—and another recognizes immediately what wood or stone would be useful for the purpose. So the question is: judgment is needed for discovering the right means. And here Hobbes makes the extraordinary decision which has immense influence up to the present day, although now it is no longer on the surface: Hobbes says everyone is the judge of the means to his self-preservation, regardless of whether he is a good judge or a bad judge. The traditional view, the Aristotelian view, was of course: the man of common sense, the man of practical wisdom, he is the judge. But Hobbes argues very commonsensically that the wise man, the practically wise man has much less interest in the self-preservation of the fool than the fool himself, so that while the wise man would be the better judge, he would not have the incentive, whereas the fool has at least incentive. And therefore Hobbes says that is a key point, the judgment of the means to self-preservation belongs by nature to each, and infinite consequences follow from that.

I mention only one more point. The key thesis of Rousseau, by which he opposes Hobbes and to some extent also Locke, is that this right to judge of the means of self-preservation, which belongs by nature to each, must be preserved within civil society—which Hobbes never said, because Hobbes was perfectly satisfied with absolute monarchy. That means that the natural right to judgment must be preserved within civil society, i.e., the only form of polity which is in accordance with natural right is democracy. In democracy, every member of society preserves the right to judge of the means. To judge of the means in a civil society is simply the right to participate in legislation, because the laws are the final decision as to what are the right means of self-preservation. But to come back to the point at which I left off: the Declaration of Independence is, as I say, an elliptical statement, and one would have to go much deeper into the whole tradition in order to see what the thesis of natural equality, which Aristotle rejects, means.

By the way, there is also a school of thought, as we can say, which is characterized by the following assertion. Plato and Aristotle of course asserted the natural inequality of man. But after them, thanks to Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire and the destruction of the *polis*, a new way of thinking emerged which was no longer particularly Greek but universal. This found its expression in the doctrine of the natural equality of all men. A certain philosophical school is credited with that. The school is the Stoic school, the Stoa. This is underlying the large work by the brothers Carlyle, *History of Political Thought in*

the West,[xi] six volumes, where you find, so to say, all quotations from late antiquity throughout the Middle Ages in which natural equality is asserted. But the trouble is that these statements are usually limited to the simple assertion in later times [that] all men are by nature equal, which occurs somewhere in Roman Law texts and which in itself doesn't mean more than, for example, slavery: that no man is by nature a slave; slavery is simply a human institution. We know much too little about this doctrine to be able to say anything; for example, in the Stoics I think there is no evidence of that. It would be beautiful if there were always such a harmony between great political and social changes, like Alexander's conquest of the Near East and a radical change in political philosophy, but there is no evidence for that. There is no reason to believe that the Stoics believed in the natural equality of man.

Now let me however return to Aristotle. For Aristotle, political inequality is ultimately justified by natural inequality among men. Some men are by nature the rulers, and others are by nature the ruled. This fact, what Aristotle takes to be a fact, points in its turn to the inequality which permeates nature as a whole. The whole as an ordered whole consists of beings of different rank: inanimate, plants, brutes, men. In man the soul is by nature the ruler of the body, and the mind is the ruling part of the soul. These things are developed in the beginning of the *Politics*. On the basis of this, thoughtful men are said to be the natural rulers of the thoughtless ones. Now there was prior to Aristotle—the best known is the sophist Antiphon. Fragments of[4] [his writings] have come to light only in our century. And he said, for example, all men are by nature equal.[xii] But he gives an argument, and the arguments are taken from the fact that we all breathe, digest, and so on. Now it is obvious that this true observation does not meet Aristotle's argument, because Aristotle was concerned with the inequality regarding intellect and thinking. But there is another egalitarian argument of which we have an indication—only an indication, a partial indication, but a very important one—in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* 41e, which you should read. I try to explain that. This argument in favor of egalitarianism starts from morality and from its implications. When we pass moral judgments, when we praise good men or good actions and blame bad men and bad actions, we presuppose that a man's actions are in his power. We make him responsible for them, and ultimately we even make him responsible for his being a good man or a bad man. He could have become a good man if he had taken the trouble: the famous phenomenon called moral responsibility.

Now what does this mean? In making such statements we presuppose that prior to the exercise of his will, or by nature, all men are equal in respect to the possibility of becoming good or bad. There is an equality of opportunity in this respect. And now this seems to be the highest respect, morality. And therefore this egalitarianism has an entirely different standard than egalitarianism based on the fact that animal and

---

[xi] R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West* (1903).
[xii] Strauss probably refers to the then-relatively recently discovered fragment 44 of Antiphon. Antiphon takes the view explicitly that all laws are mere conventions. See *Antiphon the Sophist: The Fragments*, edited, with introduction, translation and commentary by Gerard J. Pendrick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 159-69.

vegetative functions are everywhere the same. But here is the difficulty. A man's upbringing or the conditions in which he lives seem to affect very greatly, if not decisively, his potentiality of his becoming or being good or bad. In an age of social legislation, it is not necessary to belabor this point. Someone is brought up in a slum district; he would seem to have a lesser chance of becoming a good man than if he is brought up under more favorable conditions. How can one maintain man's moral responsibility in the face of the unfavorable conditions which molded him? One must make him responsible for these conditions. He himself must have willed the conditions which then, as it were, compel him to act badly. More generally, the apparent inequality among men in respect of morality must be due to human fault. This is also indicated, though very simply, in the second book of Plato's *Republic*. Moral judgment as we constantly practice it seems then to lead up to the postulate that a god concerned with justice has created all men equal as regards their possibility of becoming good or bad. One cannot leave it at that, because if all men are created by a god out of matter, then the matter might create a difficulty and be responsible for a certain fundamental inequality of man. Therefore one would have to postulate creation out of nothing by an omnipotent god, who as such must be omniscient: in other words, the absolutely sovereign God of the Bible; and therefore it would seem that the doctrine of equality, of natural equality, would be of biblical rather than of Greek philosophic origin.

But then if we turn to such a great authority in these matters as Thomas Aquinas, we see that this is by no means the case. Thomas Aquinas teaches that even in the state of innocence, if it had lasted, men would have been unequal regarding justice and there would have been government by the superior over the inferior men. Thomas faces the question: Is this not unjust, that God created men unequal? He says that God is not unjust in creating beings of unequal rank, and in particular men of unequal rank, since the equality of justice has its place in retribution, meaning someone has committed a murder. Regardless of who he was, he must be punished. But equality has no place in creation, which is an act not of justice but of liberality and is therefore perfectly compatible with the inequality of gifts, of free gifts. God does not owe anything to his creatures, and therefore he can distribute his gifts as he pleases. Therefore it is by no means self-evident that the biblical teaching leads to a teaching of natural equality among men.

What then is the issue, if we disregard popular tracts and this kind of thing and turn to the highest level of the discussion? On the high level of the tradition, the predominant view was in premodern times natural inequality. Needless to say, stated by itself that is as incomplete as the assertion of natural equality. But still, that was the starting point. What happened in modern times is of course what you find in such famous teachers as Hobbes and Locke, the assertion of natural equality. But this is not so revealing as the following point: Granted that men are by nature unequal, is this necessarily politically decisive? That is the question. Do you see what we imply if we say men are by nature unequal in the important respect? They must also be treated as unequal in political society. We suppose that nature is respectable, to put it very simply. What if nature is not respectable? Perhaps equality need not be natural; perhaps equality must be conventional, to use the old opposition. I will develop that. Rousseau's is the name[5] I must speak in the first place. According to Rousseau, the establishment of civil society means the substitution of

conventional equality for natural inequality. By nature men are unequal regarding strength, intelligence, and what have you, but civil society treats them as equal: equality before the law and not according to nature. And the social contract which creates society is the basis of morality, of moral freedom or autonomy; and in addition, for Rousseau the practice of moral virtue, the fulfillment of our duties toward our fellow men and not theoretical understanding, is the one thing needful.

I will only mention the decisive step along this line which was taken after Rousseau. Is it a man's moral duty to respect the natural inequality? Is it man's moral duty to obey any law which a man has not imposed on himself? This was the way in which Kant formulated Rousseau's central point, and this became decisive for much later thought. The natural order is as such not respectable. No law can bind man which does not originate in man's reason. A merely imposed law, imposed by nature, cannot be binding, cannot be morally binding. The moral law demands from each virtuous activity, that is to say the full and uniform development of all faculties and their exercise jointly with other men. But such a development of all faculties is not possible as long as everyone is crippled as a consequence of the inequality and ultimately of the division of labor. It is therefore the moral duty to contribute to the establishment of a society which is radically egalitarian and at the same time at the highest level of human development. In such a society, which is rational precisely because it is not natural—that is to say, because it has won the decisive battle against nature, it has conquered nature—everyone is of necessity happy, if happiness is indeed unobstructed virtuous activity. It is a society which therefore has no longer any need for coercion, because if everyone is happy by doing the socially good thing, there is no need for coercion. This thought was developed partly prior to Marx by the German philosopher Fichte,[xiii] but then in the fullest form by Marx, where you all know it. So here the question of natural inequality has completely vanished. Sure, all men are by nature unequal, but natural inequality will be overcome and is in the process of being overcome by the whole social or historical process.

There is this difficulty here, looking at the problem entirely from this angle. There are undoubtedly relics of natural inequality up to the present day—but natural inequality, we are not speaking of the merely social ones—and this natural inequality is transmitted by the natural process of procreation. But, and this is the hope of Marxism, these inequalities will gradually disappear because, as we can hope, the acquired faculties can also become inherited faculties. And then naturally you would, I believe, still need in addition very highly developed eugenic science and practice, [6]which would in itself be wholly ineffective without considerable coercion, because it so happens that people sometimes fall in love with other people who are eugenically not necessarily the best for them. But disregarding these difficulties, the key point which I would like to mention is this. The typical modern egalitarianism is not based on the principle of natural equality. It admits natural inequality but it asserts that it is the task of society to establish an ultimate equality, and the basis of that is a certain notion of the moral duty of man to treat every human being equally, equally with a view to the dignity of human beings.

[xiii] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right* (1797).

Now this brings me to another subject about which I have to say something, and then we can have a discussion. For Aristotle, as you will have seen, natural inequality is a sufficient justification for the fact that the city is a nonegalitarian society. The city is by nature, as Aristotle says, which means that the city is natural to man. When men found cities, they only execute what their nature inclines them to. Men are by nature inclined to the city because they are by nature inclined to happiness, i.e., to living together in a manner which satisfies the needs of their nature in proportion to the natural rank of these needs, meaning paying less attention to the lower needs than to the higher needs. The city, one is tempted to say, is the only association which is capable of being dedicated to the life of excellence. This is roughly the beginning of Aristotle's *Politics*. Man is the only earthly being inclined toward happiness, and he is capable of happiness. This is due to the fact that he is the only animal who possesses reason or speech, or which strives toward seeing or knowing for its own sake, or whose soul is somehow all things, as Aristotle puts it. Man is a microcosm, is a later formulation. Man is the only being within the whole which is open to the whole, to every part of the whole. There is a natural harmony between the whole and the human mind. Man is quasi–meant to see, to understand the whole. Man would not be capable of happiness if the whole of which he is a part were not friendly to man. Man could not live if nature did not supply him with food and his other wants. Nature has made—as Aristotle has put it in the first book of the *Politics*, nature has made if not all animals at least most of them for the sake of men (although not necessarily exclusively for that purpose), so that man acts according to nature if he captures or kills the animals useful to him. This is somehow the background of Aristotle and absolutely essential to his political philosophy.

Now one may describe this view of the relation of man to the whole as optimism. Now optimism as a word had originally a very precise meaning. Today it means simply sanguine. If someone is sanguine regarding the recovery from his illness or whatever crisis he may be in, we say he is an optimist. Optimism meant originally almost the opposite: it meant the view that this world is the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz is the originator of this view in these terms, but it was applied to all kinds of things. But in a way, Aristotle is in this sense an optimist: the world is the best possible world. That doesn't mean there are no evils; there are plenty of them, but we have no right to assume that the evils with which the world abounds, and especially the evils which originate in human folly, could have been absent without bringing about still greater evils. Man has no right to complain and to rebel, that is the simple practical implication. This in Aristotle's view implies[7], as he puts it, that the nature of man is enslaved in many ways, so that only very few men, and even those not always, can achieve happiness or the highest freedom of which man is by nature capable. A further consequence is that the city dedicated to excellence, truly dedicated to excellence is, to say the least, extremely rare according to Aristotle. Chance rather than human reason seems to be responsible for the various laws laid down by men. So in spite of these qualifications, which are indispensable, it is nevertheless true that Aristotle ultimately asserts life, human life, is good, not in every case—there are people in infinite misery for whom it would be better to be dead, perhaps—but life as such. It is better that there are living beings, it is better that there are men, it is better that there is a world than if there would be none. Now this view was by no means universally accepted. Aristotle was compelled to defend his view

of happiness against the poets' assertion that the divine is envious of man's happiness or bears malice to man. Aristotle did not take very seriously this assertion, but he says it is impossible that beings higher than man, i.e., more intelligent than man, should be such low fools as to be envious of man. That is all that Aristotle has to say on this subject.

Later on, however, this view in a radically modified form became very powerful. It was asserted by certain heretics of the early Christian era, and this may go back even beyond the origins of early Christianity. It is a way of thinking which has been called by some people Gnosticism, especially since Mr. Voegelin's book[xiv] is based on the doctrine that modern political thought is fundamentally a modified Gnosticism. Now this assertion regarding Gnosticism . . . which was stated first by Hans Jonas, first in German and then in an English work,[xv] and Voegelin continued that in a characteristic way. What does this mean? I mean, I [am] by no means sure that one can call that whole thing Gnosticism, but I am more interested in the identity of the view than in the label. The whole as we know it is the work of an evil god or a demon as distinguished from the good or the highest god. The most famous representative of that view is Marcion, a Christian heretic of the second or third century.[xvi] Hence, if this is true, if the world is the work of an evil demon, the end toward which man is inclined as a part of the visible whole or by nature, that end cannot be good, obviously. If the whole of nature is fundamentally bad, no natural end of man can be good. Now this view presupposes of course that man possesses knowledge of true goodness as distinguished from so-called natural goodness. How can he say that this world is evil if he doesn't have a standard which cannot stem from this world? Because everything stemming from this world is of course evil, according to this view. We cannot know true goodness by its natural powers; but this means, however, also that the alleged knowledge of true goodness lacks cogency. There is no way of proving that. Some man comes up and says so . . .

Let us therefore turn to the modern criticism of Aristotle's principle, which has something to do with that ancient view but in a very limited way. Now it is frequently said that the new anti-Aristotelian view of the seventeenth century is characterized by the rejection of final causes, teleology. This is true, but it is not sufficient because there were classical thinkers, the Epicureans are the most famous example, who also rejected final causes and yet did not deny, as the modern anti-Aristotelians did, that the good life is the life according to nature, or, as Epicurus put it, nature has made the necessary things easy to supply. That is exactly what Aristotle says. The same optimism.

Now let us consider again Aristotle's saying that our nature is enslaved in many ways. One can draw the following conclusion from that, that nature is not a kind mother

---

[xiv] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (1951). This volume is part of the Walgreen Foundation Lecture Series. See also Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Henry Regnery, 1968) (originally published in German in 1959). The first part of this volume was delivered as the inaugural lecture of the new professor of political science at the University of Munich in November 1958.

[xv] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (1958). [*Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (1934-1993)]

[xvi] Marcion of Sinope (85-160).

(otherwise she had not enslaved us), but a harsh stepmother; in other words, that the true mother of man is not nature. What is peculiar of this modern thought which I am trying to sketch now is not this conclusion by itself but the subsequent resolve to liberate man by his own sustained effort from that natural enslavement. Aristotle says that nature enslaves us in many ways. Can't help it. In modern times, some people said that then we must liberate ourselves from that environment. This resolve finds its telling expression in the demand for the conquest of nature. When you speak of "conquest of nature" you imply that nature is an enemy which has to be conquered. Accordingly, science ceases to be contemplation of a noble, beautiful whole and becomes the handmaid devoted to the relief of man's estate. We fight nature to improve the lot of man. Science is now said to be for the sake of power—Hobbes—i.e., for putting at our disposal the means for achieving our natural ends, say, self-preservation, including food and so on. But how do we get it? No kind nature gives it to us. We have to get it by hard work, by the transformation of nature.

Now these natural ends can in this stage no longer include any more knowledge for its own sake; that ceases to be. The natural ends are reduced to comfortable self-preservation. Man as the potential conqueror of nature stands outside of nature. This presupposes that there is no natural harmony between the human mind and the whole. The belief in such a natural harmony appears from now on as a wish for it or a good-natured assumption—a naiveté, as the usual word is. We must counter with the possibility that the world is the work of an evil demon bent on deceiving us about himself, the world, and ourselves by means of the faculties with which he supplies us. Did you ever hear of this strange assertion? It is at the beginning of modern philosophy: Descartes, the First Meditation, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Now Descartes was not an idle dreamer of fantastic possibilities. He said it doesn't make any difference whether you speak of such an evil demon or whether you speak of a blind natural necessity: if we are the work of a blind natural necessity which is utterly indifferent as to whether the natural necessity ever becomes known, same thing. In other words, the world which is now generally accepted. There is a natural process of evolution, or whatever it is called, [8]ultimately going back to some purely physical and chemical processes, and this process has not the slightest interest in becoming known to itself, i.e., in producing beings who can know that process. There is no shred of evidence according to this view for any natural harmony between the human mind and the world. Surely we have no right to trust in our natural faculties. Extreme skepticism is required. I can trust only what is entirely within my control, and these are the concepts which we consciously make and of which we do not claim more than that they are our constructs. In other words, everyone is free to define his key concepts as he pleases. He doesn't say they are true; he only says that is the way I am going to use this term. Of course we need in addition naked data as they impress themselves upon us and of which we do not claim more than that we are conscious of them without having made them. The knowledge which we need for the conquest of nature must be dogmatic. It cannot be skeptical. But its dogmatism must be based on extreme skepticism.

This synthesis of dogmatism and skepticism which we can classically observe in Descartes eventually takes the form of an infinitely progressive science, as a system of

confirmed hypotheses which remain exposed to revision ad infinitum. This was the consequence of the denial of the harmony between man and the whole, and therefore the harmony between human knowledge and the whole. But what are the moral and political consequences? Ultimately, natural ends are impossible. There are ends which man has by nature, but why should they be good? The mere fact that they are natural doesn't prove any more that they are good. In the early stage it was relatively simple. Such people like Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes said there are natural ends: of course, self-preservation. And the whole process of conquering nature is in the service of these natural ends, of relieving man's estate from hunger, disease, and so on. But what about these ends themselves? They are as natural and therefore as questionable as every other natural thing. An interesting intermediate stage is the term coined at that moment in the seventeenth century: the state of nature. The basis of civil society is the state of nature, and that is in a way the standard for civil society. But state of nature, which would have meant in classical times a state of perfection where man is completed, now means a state of the utmost imperfection. The state of nature in Hobbes's formula is the state of war of everybody against everybody.[xvii] Man is not by nature social. Only because nature compels man to avoid death as the greatest evil can man compel himself to become and to be a citizen. The end is not something toward which man is inclined, as he is according to the older view, but something toward which he is by nature compelled. More precisely, the end does not beckon man but it must be invented by man so that he can escape from his natural misery. Nature supplies man with an end in this stage still, but only negatively. Nature tells him from what to run away, not toward what he is moving. In Locke's doctrine it is pain, not pleasure, which guides him. This is however only an intermediate stage where the natural end as a positive end is replaced by a purely negative end.

I said the end must be invented. What do I mean? Let us take the simple and clear Hobbean scheme. By merely knowing that the state of nature is the state of misery I know that I must get out of it, but I do not have a clear positive notion where should I turn to. How do I get the positive goal? Now this positive goal is no longer an order according to nature. This positive goal takes on now the character of a mere human invention, of a mere human project. Man, considering his natural misery, devises a scheme, and that is the only way in which the good order exists. It is not natural. I would like to develop this [so that it is] a bit clearer. According to Aristotle man is by nature meant for the life of human excellence, and this end is universal in the sense that no man's life can be understood or seen as what it is except in the light of that end. But this end is very rarely achieved. A natural question: Must there not be a natural obstacle to the life of human excellence as Aristotle understood it if it is so rarely achieved? Can life be the life according to nature if it is so rarely achieved? To discover a truly universal end of man as man, one must seek primarily not for the kind of natural laws as they were understood by the Aristotelian tradition and which are perhaps more frequently transgressed than observed, we must seek for a new kind of natural laws, [9]laws which no one can transgress because everyone is compelled to act according to these laws.

[xvii] *Leviathan*, chap. 13.

Now laws of the latter kind, laws which can be transgressed as little as the laws governing the movements of the planets, this it was thought would be the solid basis of a new kind of normative laws, normative laws which can of course be transgressed but are much less likely to be transgressed than the normative laws preached up by the tradition. The new kind of normative laws which are now developed did no longer claim to be natural laws proper. They were rational laws in contradistinction to natural laws. That is the status of these laws in Hobbes, and in fact also in Locke. Now these laws, these normative laws, allegedly based on untransgressable natural laws, eventually became ideals, ideals being distinguished from laws because they are not laws. There is some element of voluntariness and even arbitrariness in that. The ideal exists only by virtue of human reasoning, or of human figuring out, in contradistinction to the natural end as Aristotle understood it, which is something which in one way or another exists by itself. I believe[xviii] —and we have then a discussion.

Let me try to summarize the point. If we start from the difference regarding democracy, we come back ultimately to the question of natural inequality and natural equality, and this with respect to the status of nature. Is the fact of natural inequality of decisive importance for the moral and political life of man, or is it not? That depends clearly on the moral relevance of nature. The characteristically modern answer is that nature does not have this respectability which it had for classical thought. Nature is not good, as in a way it was according to the classical scheme and in a modified way of course according to the biblical scheme. Toward the end of the Creation, God saw what he had created and everything was very good. Therefore, with this radical change the norms of man must be understood in a radically new way. They can no longer be understood as natural ends, and they can also no longer be understood as natural laws in the sense in which Thomas Aquinas, for example, speaks of natural laws. We have instead laws of reason in contradistinction to natural laws. In the medieval view, you can say the laws of reason and the natural laws are the same. Here the laws of reason are understood to be in opposition to the natural law, and eventually the laws of reason become something which we can best call ideals, norms which have no basis whatever in nature (this is purely accidental, if someone is interested in that) and which also do no longer have this cogency stemming from reason. What is that to which ideals in the nineteenth and twentieth century sense of the term owe their authoritative character? Neither to their naturalness nor to their reasonability. Very frequently when people speak of ideals today, they use the term "imagination." Ideals are somehow products of imagination, of some creative act, whatever it may be, surely no longer nature or reason. The detailed history of these things is very complex. But I think I would first like to see if I have made myself understood regarding the main points. Yes?

Student: You mentioned in passing the different terms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought that had relevance to this idea. I wonder if you could really say that Rousseau felt that there was an inequality of nature. And if you were to say this with a great deal of conviction, then you might perhaps point to a work or to a passage in a work.

[xviii] The tape was changed at this point.

LS: In Rousseau?

Student: Yes.

LS: But what does it mean that civil society establishes conventional equality instead of natural inequality? Does it not presuppose that the order of rank between nature and convention is completely changed, whereas according to the older view the natural is much higher than anything conventional? Now the conventional is much higher than the natural.

Student: This seems to be the fundamental problem in Rousseau, namely, yes, I agree with you that civil society does establish conventional equality, but so far as Rousseau is concerned in contradistinction to Hobbes and to Locke, there does not really; and I am really pressed to find anything in his work where he would say that nature or the state of nature or any form of natural living does enter into his scheme.

LS: What Rousseau says in his long historical account in the *Discourse on Inequality* is that he says this natural inequality did not exist at the very beginning. But what does this mean? At the very beginning men were a kind of chimpanzees, so to speak. These were beings without any reason, without any speech, without anything specifically human. There they were equal, but who cares for that? The moment men developed, the development of man is identical with the development of inequality, according to the *Second Discourse*.

Student: There is one point, though, where this breaks down. I am thinking of, if you take into account the *Second Discourse*, you also have to take into account his work on the origin of language, where he describes this very beautiful scene of how man, the two beings come together, the young man and the young woman. In the state of complete happiness, there is no inequality; it is only when men are in groups which would be by most terms, societies—

LS: But the trouble is that the problem of inequality and of inequality only arises when men live in groups. If you live somewhere in the Rocky Mountains in absolute isolation, where there are no possible terms of comparison, you are equal or unequal as you see fit; it doesn't make any difference. Now in the situation of two human beings in love, that in a way excludes the whole problem of equality because, while they may be aware of their inequality—I suppose they are of a different sex, for example—that somehow doesn't create any difficulty because[10] at least at certain stages of this relation, which you all know from the literature, they are not concerned with ruling and being ruled. Do you believe that one can express a statement of Rousseau's views in ten minutes, or an hour? That is perfectly clear. If the class would permit me ten minutes' silent meditation, I could give a lecture on Rousseau and could show to you what is the difficulty you have in mind. Rousseau saw very well, after having taught with the greatest emphasis that the state of nature is a subhuman state—he said also in a way we must return to nature. That is the famous difficulty of Rousseau. In other words, he saw that a mere rebellion against nature which he demanded—and do you know these things where he was attacked by

Burke, that the citizen as citizen comes into being by virtue of a complete break with the natural man? And Burke said with some justice that the terrible bestialities of Jacobinism can be traced to this fact, the killing of the natural emotions in favor of the hundred percent dedication to the *polis* in the most extreme Spartan–Roman sense. Rousseau saw that this is not absolutely sufficient, but[11] what he demanded, [and] regarded as possible beyond the state, was the life of a certain type of individuals: a very few men, of whom he knew one of these best, of course, that was himself. This would be the truly natural man who is not subhuman but as it were beyond convention. The difference here between Rousseau and Plato and Aristotle would come out particularly, only in a more subtle way than in the political realm. He calls this man the contemplative man, but his contemplation has so to say nothing to do with inquiry, with investigation. This contemplative life is, as one can say provisionally, a kind of mysticism. Sure, sure that is there. Rousseau wanted to return to classical antiquity, that is written large on every page. What he did at least as much as return to antiquity was to radicalize modern philosophic thought as it had been developed by the thinkers of the seventeenth century in an anticlassical manner. That is a bit complicated. And that is a somewhat unfair demand, that one be able to make the very complex things very simple; that cannot be done. I believe that what I said about Rousseau in this context was absolutely justified.

Student: The only place where I would hang the distinction is that if you were to talk of the man of nature, then fine, what you said would be true. But you talked about the man that he really attempted to put forth. Then there is a distinction to be made.

LS: Yes, there are very great complications, I grant you that, but I still say no one has emphasized the radically conventional character of society as much as Rousseau does. But with this difference: you can say that the so-called sophists said the same thing, but the value judgments differ. Rousseau sees the dignity of man linked up with the dedication to those conventions and not merely turning one's back on it or one's exploiting it. The whole moral fervor of Rousseau, of the citizen, cannot be disregarded. Rousseau is one of the richest men,[xix] for good or ill. You can say the whole problem which animated men in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century was Rousseau's problem. The anarchists as well as the idolizers of the state, especially in Germany, both trace themselves with equal right to Rousseau. The point is not that Rousseau was a confused man. He was a singularly unconfused man, but he assumed, he was sure that there is a fundamental tension between nature and convention which cannot be bridged, and where a simple solution either simply in favor of nature or simply in favor of convention is impossible. I don't believe one can change that. But we cannot go on with that. Yes?

Student: I would like to raise two questions, both of which relate to this conflict between man and nature. The first starts with the point you made about Descartes. My question is: Is it necessary or even possible to read this into Descartes? What Descartes was talking about was essentially a problem of perception, how man perceives nature. It isn't that Descartes sees something out there in nature that is evil; rather he finds the problem in man's capability of perceiving what is out there.

[xix] That is, presumably, Rousseau's thought is one of the richest.

LS: I can only say that one can say that—but it is infinitely poorer than what Descartes himself said—Descartes was concerned not with perception; he was concerned, as all philosophers formerly were, with the knowledge of the whole, of all things. And he believed, however, that hitherto all philosophers went about it in the wrong way. They had a naïve trust, you could say, which he thinks was unwarranted. In other words, he says that the old skeptical arguments against knowledge have been unrefuted, and the only way out, to get certain knowledge in the face of skepticism, is to grant the truth of the most extreme skeptical arguments and show that out of the bowels of that very skepticism absolute certainty will emerge. And that was the famous discovery of the thinking ego, the "I think, therefore I am" as the absolute basic certainty. And that is really the absolutely central event. All [of] what Locke and the English empiricists did stem[s] from that. Locke himself said [of his notion of] the way of ideas, [that] he identified that with Descartes's point. The starting point is the ego with its ideas. The notion of Descartes was of course not to leave it at that: don't do something like a so-called epistemology, but to make this the basis of the true metaphysics, the true science of the whole. One loses the substance of Descartes by such a formulation. Descartes tried to bring about a complete reformation or revolution of the human mind, of science or knowledge, or however you call it. Of course he didn't believe in that evil demon, but that he used him as a . . . for bringing out the justification for absolute skepticism is not accident[al]. And he says in a certain context: Forget about this evil demon. Call it natural necessity; the same conclusion follow[s]. If our thoughts are merely the products of physical, chemical, and whatever actions, how can there be truth under such conditions? How can there be truth? Waves cannot be true or false; human thoughts can be true or false. How is this possible? I would say a true history of modern thought would be to understand the way from Descartes's *ego cogito* to what Kant did with that, because for Kant—it happens Kant is confronted with the same problem: Is the thinking ego the fundamental phenomenon? Kant says that closer analysis shows that it is the willing, the moral ego which is the absolute basis. These abstract formulae contain our true history. This lady, yes?

Student: In this connection, are you saying it is essential to the Aristotelian formulation that there are certain ends or an order in nature, and that they are good?

LS: Surely that they are good, but the general point is that this order is in itself good, and therefore also the natural ends of men in particular are good. If you know that this is the natural end of man, you know that it is good, for Aristotle. Whereas for Kant, to take the clearest case, the question begins there: Why should the natural be good? The same shows in the so-called epistemological question: Is there a natural harmony between the human mind and the whole? And Aristotle says: Yes, there is, otherwise there would be no knowledge possible. And one can say that modern epistemology tries to show the possibility of knowledge on the premise that there is no natural harmony. One sees that, by the way, already in Bacon, who tries to look for how to remedy the natural disharmony between the human mind and the whole. One consequence of course is that knowledge is not knowledge of the whole; knowledge is strictly speaking the

development of hypotheses or free constructs. You know? Well, they can be validated or invalidated, but the hypothesis does not directly express what is.

Student: Well, what I have in mind, actually, is that if it is not possible to confirm the fact that there is an order of nature and that there are natural ends, then I still don't see the relevance of natural inequalities to things political. But it seems to me we would have to read in that formulation—

LS: That would be absolutely terrible and the end of human reason. But the question is: Is not what at first glance seems to be from our point of view today a naïve faith not necessary? In other words, one would have to go into this difficult question—very difficult question, much too difficult for me here or for me anywhere, but the question is discussed, for example, when Kant said the thing in itself is unknowable. What we can do is only organize the phenomena so that they make an ordered whole, which is our human understanding and not the absolute understanding. That is one very classic modern thinker. And then there came someone who was called Hegel, and [he] tried to show that this is fundamentally an absurd position in Kant.

That is, by the way, a simple formula for the modern times. It is an impossible assertion, because you say at the same time it is unknowable and it is [knowable]. How can you do that? And [there are] certain other considerations. If philosophy is based on certain hypotheses ultimately which can be substituted for others, then that is not philosophy. Then you would have to do something entirely different, which has been tried by modern men, and make a system of the basic possible hypotheses—Aristotle's, Kant's, and *n* others—and say that the contemplation of the fundamental possibilities or the fundamental alternatives, that's all we can do. But then this would be the absolute knowledge. Do you see that? At one point one must stop at knowledge, otherwise one gets into trouble. By the way, I believe it makes sense to say that without the natural harmony of the human mind and the whole it is impossible. Today it is absolutely incredible that Aristotle says [that],[12] for the following reason: because we assume, on the basis of evolution or some such thing, that man is a mere accident. You know, there are *n* other species of animals, and each animal has its particular apparatus of perception. In the case of man, it is a bit more complicated because man also can make verbal symbols. That's all there is to it. This human image of the whole is in no way superior or truer than the image which a bat, a rat, a dog, a sea lion, or whatever else may have. In other words, man is not the center, of which we were so proud. You have heard Freud, for example, proclaiming the great steps. Copernicus: the earth is no longer the center. What was the second step? Darwin: man is just one species of animal among others. And the third step in man himself: the subconscious and all the most subrational, that is really the bulk of man, and reason is but a tiny little thing of no importance. The alternative view is that man is the center of the whole. And that is what all Greek philosophers meant, whether they expressed it in this form or that, and that must be faced. It is of no use to say these naive people in their small cities of the Middle Ages didn't know General Electric and quite a few other things . . . Perhaps man is really much, much more important. And some people say: Well, this is human pride. They say the lions think the same thing, or the rats.

No! They don't think. The fact that man is capable of foolish pride is based on a distinction of men. Yes?

Student: Apparently you are in opposition to the view that the essence of modernity consists in the essential problem of articulating Christianity, and that the essence of modernity consists in various forms of immanentizations of the Christian eschaton as developed by Voegelin and Löwith. Apparently you are in opposition to this. Do you have time to go into a criticism of this?

LS: I will tell you what I think, what I have to do at this point. I have to turn to our subject very soon, because I have not yet even mentioned the theme of Aristotle's *Politics*, because the *polis* is not the theme. When you look at the beginning of almost all eight books of the *Politics*, almost all of them (or at the end of the *Ethics*, where the theme is already described), you find, if you have a good translation, [that] not *polis* is the key word but *politeia*, ordinarily translated by constitution. I will translate it by "regime," because I don't know of a better translation. That is the Aristotelian theme. This is very difficult for us to understand, not as practical people—as citizens, it is extremely easy to see—but as theoreticians. And I will take up Mr. Voegelin's interpretation of that, because I think he is wrong and I will show it. And that is a typical difference between Voegelin and me. Now I think this thesis that modern thought can be adequately understood as a secularization of Christian thought has been held by other people. You know that is very commonly held. I don't believe it is very helpful, because secularization can mean all kinds of things. Secularization means that certain things are dropped. But which things are dropped?

Student: But isn't what Voegelin is saying is that what has happened is that certain symbols have been drawn from revelation and have been explicated in immanent terms, that there has been a breakdown in communication? The breakdown started essentially with Eusebius, and we find it most classically stated in the Middle Ages in Joachim of Floris.

LS: I know the thesis of Voegelin . . . but I have seen the application of this to the interpretation of Machiavelli, and there I think it has no basis. Well, let me state it very simply, because I am a strong believer in the surface of things, and when I look at the surface I see one amazing thing which every child knows as a fact. That is that wherever you look in modern times, and however people may even look down with contempt on it, they nevertheless are molded by it, and that is modern natural science. And everything turns around that. And the question is whether it is[13] [possible] to understand the mathematical physics of modern times in terms of the secularization of biblical thought. The greatest attempt in this direction was made by a French scholar, Duhem,[xx] to show how the fundamental concepts of modern physics were prepared by a certain school in Paris [in the] fourteenth century, nominalist school. But that is very contested. If we disregard this massive thing, if we look at political doctrine as it is narrowly conceived, I think it can be demonstrated that the break was made for the first time with both Greek and biblical thought by Machiavelli. Again, that is not recondite wisdom. I believe that

[xx] Pierre Duhem (1861-1916), French physicist and philosopher of science.

many textbooks say so. I didn't believe it originally, but I learned that they are right. And I think it is not very helpful, but one can try it. But I don't think it is very helpful to say that this is a secularization of biblical thought.

Student: But the original problem of creating a Christian order, the problem of representation—

LS: But that begs all questions, if you say that the fundamental problem is of representation . . . I [will] discuss this book, *The New Science of Politics*,[xxi] at some length. It simply presupposes the preexisting community which is presented. The question, the begged question, is the difference between a mere multitude and a community which can be represented. That is at the basis. I will take up this as a specific problem which I can then handle with some precision. I will take up Voegelin's interpretation of Aristotle, because it is very helpful for making clear what Aristotle meant.

Student: At the beginning of the course you referred to the crisis of our time, and at least part of this crisis was traced to the fact that we have lost sight of our purpose and that somehow we can recapture our purpose if we return to Aristotle's *Politics*. I'm not clear. If we have had such a massive revolution in thought because of an abandonment of Aristotle's view of harmony of man and nature, is there any way now to recapture our purpose with Aristotle, say, after the revolution of modern natural science, now that we are so massively affected by modern natural science?

LS: That is a very important and difficult question. Permit me now to say something much more limited, and you can say that I boasted at the beginning. But since advertising is regarded as a legitimate proceeding in our society, and I don't go so far as some producers of dentifrice,[xxii] one thing one must say. Surely we all are aware that we are in a crisis. But do we diagnose it properly? That is the question. In other words, it is the most primary need for us as thinking beings, as distinguished from intellectuals, to see what are the fundamental questions. I would assert that to recover the fundamental questions is not possible on the basis of present-day social science, because present-day social science presupposes a certain answer or a set of answers to the fundamental questions and argues on that basis. In order to understand this phenomenon of modern natural science with its infinite consequence for man's understanding of himself, i.e., for the social sciences, we have no better help practically, pragmatically, empirically speaking than such people as Plato and Aristotle. Does this make sense? Because they did not share the specific presuppositions of the modern thinkers, surely not. Whatever may be wrong with them, they did not take for granted the same things which we take for granted. And they did it on a very high level, so that it is really breadth, depth, that we acquire in studying them.

We have another question which we discussed last time when we contrasted the key Aristotelian concept, the *polis*, with the modern equivalent now, culture. We saw that

---

[xxi] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (1952).
[xxii] Commonly known as toothpaste.

there was a radical difference, and the issue is not settled by that fact that we know that and can identify that. We must think more about it, [about] who is right. Surely we must do that. But the first thing we need is to have a distance from our merely habitual and customary notions if we want to think freely. Would you admit that? You know there are people, some in high positions not only in politics but even in academic life, who know nothing except what has happened in the past twenty or thirty years. [You see this in] the discussions now going on. That is parochialism, and the dangerous parochialism is not that of the simple tribe who know nothing of the West—they don't claim to be men of science—but if men of science are parochial. Well, of course you could say you don't have to read Aristotle in particular; the study of such a man as Montesquieu, I would admit that, of course. But Montesquieu, perhaps the broadest modern social philosopher, his whole argument presupposed modern natural science.

There is one thing, however, which I indicated in the first meeting and which I must repeat here. One thing seems to be settled as far as I am concerned, and that is [that] the simple application of the natural sciences and their method to the sciences of man is not a solution. In other words, natural science cannot claim to be the universal science, because it cannot deal adequately with human things. And that of course was different from the seventeenth century. At least in the case of Descartes, there are two substances, the extended and the thinking one, and his new mathematical physics dealt only with the extended substance—with matter, not with the mind. But today this dualistic metaphysics has fallen into complete disrepute, and what we have instead of the science of the soul[14] [is] psychology as it is now understood. And whatever may have been wrong with the old science of the soul, there is also something wrong with the present-day psychology, and we have to think of something better.

Student: If we understand that the crisis of our time . . . the basic use of modern natural science for the relief of man's estate in both East and West, and we can see that this is pervasive and perhaps cannot be stopped in any way, would the study of political philosophy—and if we become convinced that Aristotle was right—could this lead to anything more than a sort of pessimistic despair about modern life, or could it lead to really being able to prescribe some way out of this crisis?

LS: That is a very good question, and I would say that it is by no means a way out. And I believe that every man in his senses reading the daily papers must be doubtful whether there is a way out, because it does not depend only on that you have a nice notion of how the conflict might be settled, but there must also be takers for that. You know? And whether takers are available is a very great question. We cannot exclude that . . . without hope would be absolutely ghastly. But there is something else which we are likely to forget. I would put it this way. There is one thing, even if we cannot have any influence on the decisions by omission or commission, which will be made:[xxiii] our expectations. We can change our fundamental expectations. The expectation of a world of perfect happiness and perfect affluence and perfect justice which is so important an element in all present-day thought, both in the communist and the noncommunist world, we can change our view about it. There is even a message of hope there. I don't know whether you

[xxiii] Though there is no ellipsis in the transcript, it is possible that a word is missing here.

recognize that. Aristotle makes occasionally the simple remark that man[15] [is generated by man the sun].[xxiv] I will state it so that it is not . . . to you. Man is generated by man and the sun, the sun standing for the extrahuman conditions of human life. God does not change. In other words, there is a fundamental naturalness of human life which is still preserved even in these . . . called the big cities and so on, and part of that natural equipment is the human mind. If we make the necessary effort, we can still think unobstructedly, and that we do not owe in itself to anything but nature and its possible creator, surely not to any human establishment. Human establishments facilitate it or obstruct it to some extent, but the fundamental possibility is man's natural . . . Two more [questions].

Student: Aristotle's idea of the end of man depends on his idea of nature, and since you mention that his idea of nature contains a great deal of optimism, I was wondering if you could answer Voltaire's answer against Leibniz's quotation that this is the best of all possible worlds. And then also Aristotle's definition of nature depends so much on an immediacy, that knowing doesn't make any difference to what is known, whereas I think the whole history of modern philosophy brings out the fact that we don't have immediacy.

LS: [. . .][xxv] There is of course a very wonderful story, *Candide*,[xxvi] but whether it would really hit Leibniz, one would have to study Leibniz, and one can safely say it has no effect whatever on that. Leibniz knew these evils; he takes it for granted. He said that in spite of these evils, and especially the many evils which men bring on themselves, it is still the best of all possible worlds. That is not the point. I will give you another example. What Voltaire did in such a graceful way, if not in every respect adequate, was done [a] million times since. And I remember one statement which was made in this country about a hundred years ago by Melville, which I read in Thompson's book, *Melville's Struggle With God*,[xxvii] I believe. Melville has a hero in that novel, *The Confidence Man*,[xxviii] and the confidence man is a man who creates trust, optimism; and he enlarges it so that the confidence man is a printer. This confidence man says to some individual whom he tries to trick: "Look what you owe to nature and its creator." And he gives as an example the eyes, [with] which [one] can see all these beautiful sunsets and whatever there is. And the addressee says: "You are utterly mistaken. I owe my eyesight not to nature but to an oculist in Philadelphia." That is much of Voltaire's argument. Did Aristotle not know that? Well, he who said that our nature is enslaved in many ways surely knew that. But let us look at the optimist's view. The fact is undeniable, that we have many defects. Each one has his defects, I suppose, and we need the oculist or other people. But what does the oculist do? Let us only take the facts of Melville and only look at them more closely. The oculist looks at normal healthy eyes. Looking at them, he restores to a sick eye, if he can, its eyesight. What is his model? What is the model which he follows when doing that? Nature.

[xxiv] Aristotle's *Physics* 194b13.
[xxv] The transcriber notes: "Inaudible for perhaps two or three sentences."
[xxvi] Voltaire, *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* (1759).
[xxvii] Lawrance Roger Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel With God* (1952).
[xxviii] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857).

Student: Yes, but since there isn't any perfected nature, what is the model for a perfected nature?

LS: The model is perfect eyesight, of course. There are people of perfect eyesight; that is not the point. What Aristotle means is that the world is incredibly rich in defects, and not only defects due to man but also in natural defects. Aristotle thought, and he made it rather clear, that he regards most men as defective in the most important respect. But how could he know that? How did he know that they are defective? Because we know that there is a human nature. We couldn't speak of defect, we couldn't complain, if we are sensible people, if nature did not supply us with a model. To come back to the crisis, you know there are no natural ends, there are only values. And this leads to certain difficulties because there is still a social science or half-social science called psychiatry. There are neurotic people, people of such and such defects. That is a value judgment. People can deny that, but whenever you say about a man that he is neurotic, you surely mean to disqualify him in one way or the other. And that is the practically important implication of the value judgment. Now do you know what they do? You wouldn't believe it. I had at one time a student in my class who was somewhat impressed by the observation that there is really an anomaly in the fact that you do have objective value judgments in psychiatry, and he said: It is clear what you must do. These value judgments are also relative. In other words, the American society defines neurosis in its way, or a certain stratum of American society does so. And I haven't seen yet that they apply it yet to somatic medicine, but it is sure to come, that all distinctions which we make of better or worse are fundamentally arbitrary. That is, I believe, the *reductio ad absurdum* of this whole thing, and the intraacademic sign of the crisis: we do not know what we should do. We have an enormous apparatus of knowledge, power, and we cannot know—that is axiomatic—what to do with that power. That situation is surely not a satisfactory situation.

Student: Well, then the question is, if everything is so dependent on the idea of nature and we can't know nature, how can we be sure we know . . . You would agree that the process of knowing demands a certain change in nature.

LS: Let us not jump into these terrible questions without having laid the foundations. We take this up on another day. I'm sorry. We have to adjourn.

---

[1] Deleted "the other difficulty"
[2] Deleted "is"
[3] Deleted "never"
[4] Deleted "him"
[5] Deleted "of whom"
[6] Deleted "and"
[7] Deleted "that"
[8] Deleted "ultimately going back to some process of evolution, whatever it is called"
[9] Deleted "of"
[10] Deleted "they don't"
[11] Deleted "this"
[12] Deleted "at first glance"
[13] Deleted "impossible"

[14] Deleted “we have”
[15] Deleted “generates man and the sun”

Session 11: 6 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: [ii]1So in order to understand what Aristotle means by *polis*, we must distinguish *polis* from state and therefore also from society. But in our present way of speaking, the proper conceptual equivalent of what Aristotle means by *polis* is what is now called culture. The key difference between Aristotle and the concept of *polis* and the modern concept of culture concerns the view regarding the divine things. The second point I tried to make clear concerns the relation of *polis* and democracy, the *polis* and the *demos*. According to Aristotle, the fact of natural inequality regarding understanding is of the greatest political importance, notwithstanding natural equality in other respects. In order to understand that, we look at the typically modern equivalent to that, which expresses itself in the thesis that one must replace natural inequality by manmade or conventional equality.

This was Rousseau's formula, and in a more radical form we find this underlying Marxism: that the social revolution, which implies the abolition of the distinction between intellectual and manual labor, will bring about equality on the highest level. There is of course a kind of egalitarianism in existence which is concerned only with equality and uninterested on what level equality takes place. Marxism, according to its doctrine, is interested in equality on the highest level, namely, where each man develops all human faculties fully. But Marxism is saddled with a difficulty: [2]the natural heritage of inequality is not disposed of by any social revolution. [By "natural heritage of inequality"] I mean the genes. In other words, Marxism must devise, if it tries to achieve its goal, a eugenics on a terrific scale, which means an enormous amount of coercion going much beyond what they have been doing now, plus Lysenko.[iii] You know the famous Lysenko thing; this was not a mere accident. That was I think an essential necessity for Marxism, how to get rid of the inherited inequalities in the interest of the ultimate equality. The only way in which it can be done theoretically is if the acquired faculties are as inheritable as the nonacquired forms. Liberal democracy, in contradistinction to Marxism, tries to solve this complicated question of equality and inequality by the distinction between the people and the government. The people are here

---

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 45-49.

[ii] The session began with remarks about the next few class meetings.

[iii] Trofim Lysenko (1898-1976) became Director of the Institute of Genettics in the USSR Academy of Sciences under Stalin. He rejected the science of genetics as it had been developed by Mendel in favor of a version of Lamarckian evolution which held that, for example, giraffes stretched their necks and passed that trait on to their offspring. Soviet scientists attempted to adopt this strategy to serve practical needs. For example, Lysenko made the dubious claim that he had changed a species of spring wheat into winter wheat. In a speech in 1948 Lysenko denounced Mendel, and all scientists who disagreed with him were purged. A series of crop failures and food shortages forced Lysenko's removal in 1965. Sarah Zielinski, "When the Soviet Union Chose the Wrong Side on Genetics and Evolution," Smithsonian.com, February 1, 2010.

presupposed to be equal, consisting of equals, and the inevitable inequality is allowed for by the distinction between the people and the government. Simply stated, there is a universal and equal right to vote, but elective and appointive office are not a universal right, but privileges. Or another formula: equality of opportunity, which does not mean equality of achievement or equality of reward.

To come back to Aristotle. The acceptance of natural inequality implies that what is natural is good. Properly understood, that is the premise of Aristotle, and it means also that there is a fundamental harmony between the human mind and the whole. There is a natural harmony between them, whereas in modern times we find the view very powerful according to which nature is an enemy. She has to be conquered, and the conquest is not only material but also intellectual, i.e., "understanding" does not mean to be open to the whole, to perceive it, but the human understanding, the human understanding prescribes nature its laws according to the formula by Kant. The human understanding brings order into the chaotic data supplied by nature. This is a very brief summary of what we discussed in the last meeting.

I make now my next step. The theme of Aristotle's *Politics* is inadequately described by the term *polis*. The proper and more adequate description is *politeia*. If you look at the beginnings of all books of the *Politics* except the first, you will see, if the translation were tolerably adequate, that *politeia* and not *polis* is the theme of Aristotle's *Politics*. I must explain that. And by the way, also at the end of the *Ethics* where Aristotle discusses provisionally the theme of the *Politics*, we see that *politeia* is the theme. The ordinary translation is "constitution." The term "constitution" as now used especially in this country is the heir to an older term, especially in the English world but also in France: the fundamental law. That was a term used in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was then gradually raised to what constitution means now, fundamental laws being laws which cannot be changed. For example, the law Salic[iv] in France, that no females can rule and the inalienability of the royal domain, such things were regarded as fundamental laws which cannot be changed. But we limit ourselves now to constitution. The constitution is a law, it is a fundamental law. But *politeia* is used in contradistinction to all laws. According to Aristotle all laws have to be established relative to the *politeia*. The *politeia* is the fundamental fact prior to any law. The equivalent you find in the United States Constitution would be the very first words: "We the People." Those who gave themselves this Constitution are prior to the Constitution. They are the cause of it, we can say. Now what is that, what is prior? Aristotle says at the beginning of the third book, the *politeia* is an order of the inhabitants of the *polis*. Now that is a very simple thing, so simple that many people can't understand it because it is so obvious. You have the inhabitants of the *polis*, a thousand, five hundred thousand, millions, it doesn't make any difference. You can arrange them in different ways. There is one way of arranging them which is this [LS writes on the blackboard]; there is another way which is this. There is another where there is one man here, another here, another here. This first would be unqualified democracy. This would be a monarchy in which every other is merely a subject without

[iv] Salic law was a legal code established around 500 AD by the Franks in northern Gaul following the collapse of the western Roman Empire. It prohibited females and descendants in the female line from inheriting titles, offices, and land.

any difference. This would be an hierarchic society—and you can figure it out indefinitely. This order is the *politeia*, which means primarily the actual order, not the legally established order. It cannot be legally established ultimately because all laws come from it. Let us therefore express it as prudently as possible as the factual distribution of power in the community. Aristotle says it is the arrangement with a view to the magistracies. Now magistracies means all the ruling offices, regardless of whether they are legislative, executive, or judicial.

Yet at the same time, *politeia* is not merely an order of human beings. It is at the same time, as Aristotle says, some way of life of the *polis*; or as Isocrates, a Greek orator, says, the soul of the *polis*. We must understand the relation between these two things: the order among the individuals being members of a *polis*, and the fact that it is the way of life of the *polis*. In sociology, people speak of social stratification, and that means there is a factual order of the society which in itself has nothing to do with any legal order; and this stratification means of course that there are people higher up and lower in a purely descriptive manner. There is a peculiar kind of man which sets the tone of a society, which gives it its character. But that means from Aristotle's point of view that kind of man determines the end of that society, what that society regards as that for the sake of which everything else is done—the spirit of society, to use this somewhat old-fashioned term. Sometimes the term national character means something similar. Now this spirit of a society, however you call it, depends ultimately on a specific image of man, the kind of man the members of society look up to. In the clearest and simplest case, this type rules the society in broad daylight, but that is not necessarily always the case. There can be a cleavage. For example, the ruling man can be despised as a politician. And people can look up to an entirely different type; for example, to Hollywood actors and actresses. That is a more complicated case, but the complicated case can always be understood only on the basis of the clear and simple case. That is interesting, that such divergences are possible.

Now in a democracy, if Plato is right in the eighth book of his *Republic*, in a democracy all types of men are recognized. There is no predominant type, according to a certain remark in the *Republic*.[v] Yet this is of course not quite true, because we have to take more seriously the claim of democracy, the preponderance of the common man. This is not altogether negligible, although it is too simple, because the common men are not ordinarily rulers. They may be decisive in the election, but they are ordinarily not elected. Therefore in classical antidemocratic literature, people spoke of the demagogues, which literally means the leaders of the *demos*, and the leaders of the *demos* are not simply ordinary members of the *demos*. Now if we look today at democracy as we know it directly, we see that the recognition of each human type is not strictly speaking correct. We always can observe that in fact one or few types are preferred. I give you a very simple example. This phenomenon is of course very well known, but it is usually not looked at from this point of view. That is advertisements, which are very revealing. If you see a representation of a member of the female sex, you can say it is ordinarily a young lady of twenty or twenty-one. Somehow she acts as the preferred type so that girls, young girls of six, and great-grandmothers of eighty model themselves on the girl of twenty-

[v] *Republic* 557c.

one. In the case of males it is more complicated, because I think there are two preferred types: the athletic young man, and the slightly graying chief executive, perhaps around forty-six. But that is, by the way, interesting, that there is this bifurcation in the case of males and not such a bifurcation in the case of females—very interesting, but I do not wish to go into that now. There is a great complexity here, but the great complexity must not blind us to the fundamental question, whether or not every given society does not in fact take a preference for one human type, and whether this preferred human type is not also setting the tone by ruling the community in broad daylight. By the way, I translate the word *politeia* by "regime," because I think that is the best word available. If someone knows something better I will always gladly accept it.

Now I will first make this a little bit more intelligible by giving you a very summary statement of Aristotle's distinction of the various kinds of regime. Now the schema is very simple: regimes must be either good or bad. Those which are concerned with the common good are good; those which are only concerned with the selfish good of the ruler are bad. That is one principle. The other principle is also very simple: the ruler may be one, a few, and all or many. One: good, monarchy; and bad, tyranny. Few: good, aristocracy; and bad, oligarchy. All: good, he calls polity; and bad he calls democracy. The same scheme is used later on by Polybius, where he calls—that is perhaps a small point—but he calls the good rule of all a democracy and the bad rule of all ochlocracy, mob rule. The idea is this.[vi] This is the best, kingship is the best, tyranny is the worst, and the other order of preference is indicated by the arrow. This scheme has one advantage: it is complete. Is there anything missing? Is there any alternative left out? Aristotle can easily show that there are *n* subdivisions of each, but there is no group which is left out. But Aristotle knows this is by no means sufficient to understand. For example, how could you know from this scheme that oligarchy is the rule of the rich? You know only that it is the bad rule of the few. Then you have to go into the substantive considerations which Aristotle gives.

He uses also an additional scheme in books 4 to 6, which are the most meaty from the point of view of empirical analysis, and here he starts from a very practical problem. What is the real issue in every *polis* in Aristotle's time? That is the conflict between the poor and the rich, and ultimately between democracy and oligarchy. Aristotle starts from this as the basic point. Then he raises the question: Since democracy and oligarchy are each unsatisfactory, they are both extremes, we must find a mean. A mean for Aristotle does not mean this. [LS writes on blackboard] That would be a lousy compromise; it is not a mean. A mean is something which combines the advantages of each while avoiding the disadvantages. It is therefore higher than the two extremes, and this he calls polity. Now the polity is a qualified democracy, qualified from the point of view of property. Everyone who can equip himself with heavy arms—you don't have to be rich for that, but you must have some property. Full citizen rights are limited to those who have[vii], who have served and who can serve as . . . But here you have a higher principle. Democracy means simply freedom as principle, freedom to live as one likes; and that is not sufficient, because there is no virtue implied. Oligarchy means wealth, also no virtue implied, no

[vi] Strauss evidently writes on the blackboard or refers to something already written there.
[vii] It is possible that there is a word missing here or that a word was inaudible.

good. Here there is the principle [. . .],[viii] service for the country, courage, manliness, virtue of war, which is intrinsically higher; but this is only a limited part of virtue. Therefore there is a still higher form, which is aristocracy, rule of the virtuous. And there are all kinds of intermediate forms. These are the two schemas. One must consider both equally if one wants to understand the heart of Aristotle's *Politics*.

I add one more point which is also of crucial importance. [3]In order to make clear what this *politeia* really is, [4][Aristotle] uses certain terms which he uses also in his theoretical writing, which were however already used by Plato, and they were even known to common sense. When you look at a shoemaker, [at] what he is doing, he obviously needs material. Let us take the example of leather, that is the material. Or the carpenter uses wood: the wood comes from the forest and the forest is called [*hule*], and so this word [*hule*] came to be used for matter. The philosophic term for matter comes from that. Don't think anything fantastic about that; whenever you produce something you use materials to make it. And what does a shoemaker or carpenter do? He puts his stamp on it. He doesn't stamp the label or the price, but he gives it a shape or a form. He puts a form on the materials, and when this is done the thing is ready. Both are equally necessary, matter and form, but form gives it its character.

Now Aristotle thinks that this is also very helpful for understanding political society. If you have a *polis*, you have two elements: [first], the human beings as mere human beings. And there will be this under any regime, whether it is a monarchy, tyranny, oligarchy or democracy. The regime is a form which is imposed on them, which makes them members of a democratic, oligarchic, aristocratic, monarchic society. Now what Aristotle teaches seems to be very paradoxical. That which makes a city, a *polis*, one is above all the regime. He uses as his example—it is a very good example: there are twenty-four or fifty or however human beings. Today they are used in a chorus in a tragedy, tomorrow they are used in a chorus in a comedy. They are the same human beings, but what makes them today a tragic chorus and tomorrow a comic chorus is some form put on them. They serve an entirely different function when they serve in a tragedy than when they serve in a comedy. Since the function is the most important thing, the emphasis is not on the fifty or the twenty-four people, or however many they are prior to their becoming members of the chorus, but [on] their training and activity as either members of the tragic chorus or the comic chorus. Aristotle says that is a good example for making clear the difference between a democracy and an oligarchy and any other variety of regimes.

But there is this very great difficulty here. If what makes the city one is above all the regime, how can we account for the obvious continuity of cities in spite of all the changes of regimes? When someone writes a history of the English constitution, he assumes that there is a single constitution which changes from at least the time of William the Conqueror up to the present time. Or if you would say, "Well, the constitutions differ, [but] surely [it is] one and the same England; the substance of England, the underlying substratum, has undergone many changes, and then it was different in Cromwell's time and James II's time and under George III and now," that seems to be much more sensible. Aristotle says, "No, it is a different country now from what it was, surely, before the

[viii] Strauss might have said "timocracy" here.

Reform Bill."[ix] That seems to be fantastic. Now I will briefly explain it. At the beginning of the third book—and the third book is surely the most important book, the most fundamental book—Aristotle says, "People are now of a different opinion. Some people say the *polis* has done a certain action; others say, 'No, not the *polis* but the oligarchy or the tyrant'"—an[y] action, say a contractual obligation, foreign debts, or internal debts, for that matter. [Then] there is a revolution. The new government says, "No, we didn't do it, we the people didn't do it, these damned oligarchs did it, or that damned tyrant did it. We have no obligation." Now Aristotle is not now concerned with the legal question at the moment, but he says: Look [at] what these people do. They say it wasn't done by the *polis* but by a certain regime, say, by the oligarchy, not by the *polis*. They imply there is no *polis* if there is no democracy. There is no *polis*. Well, of course the houses are there, but there is no *polis*. Let us call this type of man the partisan. The partisan, if I understand him, says, "If there is not the preferred regime, then there is no political society." In metaphoric speech, we all know that. The oligarch would say in a further advance of democracy, "The country is going to pieces, the *polis* ceases to exist." Well, he doesn't mean it so literally, but Aristotle says if he would understand himself he wouldn't mean it literally. That is a partisan. And now we have another type of man, the sensible type, who would say it is the duty of the good citizen to serve his *polis* regardless of the changes of regimes. Look at England in the seventeenth century, when there were many changes, [at] a man who did his best for England under Charles I, under Cromwell, under Charles II, and then under William III—I mean, if he had lived long enough:[x] Is this not a better man than one who is simply a fanatical adherent of the old monarchy, or of the commonwealth, or of that moderate monarchy under William III? Let us call this man the patriot: [for him] the country counts much more than the regime. But these people, however, these nice men were subject to one accusation: they are called by the others the turncoats, naturally. There is beautiful evidence for that.

This is a view which Aristotle reports in his *Constitution of Athens*, which is a more popular book, but that is not the view which he takes in his *Politics*. In the *Politics* he makes this unimpeachable statement: since citizen is relative to regime—as we can easily prove, a citizen in a democracy would not be a citizen in an oligarchy and so on—if citizen is relative to regime, good citizen must be relative to a regime. And therefore a man who is a good citizen in a democracy can only be a bad citizen in an oligarchy. You cannot be a neutral, that is the point. If we look at Aristotle and contrast him with the partisan on the one hand and with patriot on the other, we see that he is neither partisan nor patriot. I would say, if I have to use such a simple term, that Aristotle is a partisan of human excellence, and for this reason he cannot identify himself with the partisans of[5] [anything] other than human excellence, nor can he identify himself with the simple patriot. And the theoretical expression of this is the following thing. The partisan is wrong when he says that with the change of regime, [of] what he regards as the right kind

---

[ix] The Reform Bill of 1832, also known as the "Great Reform Act," changed the British electoral system, eliminating rotten boroughs and extending to new towns the right to elect Members of Parliament. Only men with property of at least ten pounds could vote, which excluded most of the working classes, and only men who could afford to stand for selection could serve as Members of Parliament.

[x] Charles I assumed the throne in 1605; William III died in 1702.

of regime, the *polis* is destroyed or ceases to be; and the patriot is wrong when he says that all changes of regime are superficial changes, [that] the *polis* subsists in all changes. And the Aristotelian view is to say the *polis* changes decisively in a regime change but it is not destroyed; it changes into another *polis*. That is the simple assertion of Aristotle. I will discuss it more fully later, and I think the simplest starting point from our present-day experience, in order to understand Aristotle, is the famous question of loyalty.

I will only say a few words about that. When you speak today of loyalty, you mean of course in the first place loyalty to the United States, surely, but that is not quite true. If a communist or fascist would say: "What I mean is surely best for the people of the United States, I am more loyal to the United States than the others," he could say that, but this view would not be accepted, because what loyalty means is loyalty to the established regime, loyalty to the United States as defined by the Constitution, by the established order. And if someone should say: "Well, if there should take place a change of the regime in the future, say, into communism, then everyone is expected now to be a loyal communist," that would play havoc with all existing governments. I will develop this later. Aristotle has this in mind. Every country, and the loyalty to the country which is always demanded goes through the regime and does not refer simply to the bare matter, the human beings, the real estate and so on. Now this doctrine of Aristotle is, to begin with, really unintelligible. But you must always make one step which we have raised before in this class: our concepts are at variance with the fundamental concepts of Aristotle, but not our experiences. We must discover the experience in our experience; then we will understand it, and then we will also see that and how our concepts block us off from Aristotle but not our experience. I gave this example at the beginning of this discussion when I said [that][6] in reading Aristotle's statements about *polis*, when you think there of the country rather than of society or the state, then you have already the right smell for what he means. Our experience of the country corresponds to the experience Aristotle has of the *polis*. Our concepts create a block.

Now there has been an interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics* by Eric Voegelin in his six-volume work, *Order and History*, of which three volumes have appeared.[xi] And this is rather an extensive statement, about eighty pages, and it is also, how shall I say—it is not an antiquarian statement and therefore it is of some interest here. Before I turn to his remarks on the third book of Aristotle, I must first tell you what his premises are as they appear in this chapter on Aristotle, his general premises. He says, and this is meant partly in rendering Aristotle's thought: "Political science, in the sense of a general science of action, is inseparable from a philosophy of historical existence." There is no philosophy of historical existence in Aristotle, that is untranslatable into Greek, but Voegelin believes that this is necessary. That is the fundamental difference between him and Aristotle. I will read to you two more passages indicating his philosophic premise. This statement was on page 302, but I am going to read from page 295. He says he will find the Platonic will and its product the idea. In other words, the Platonic idea, a subject into

[xi] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 5 vols. Volumes 1-3 were published in 1956-57; volume 4 appeared in 1964, and volume 5 appeared posthumously in 1987. In the following pages Strauss reads from *Order and History (volume 3): Plato and Aristotle*, available in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Dante Germino, v. 16 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

which I cannot possibly enter now, is the product of the Platonic will. This is of course wholly incompatible with Plato's and Aristotle's view of the ideas. Another point, which is also a characteristic premise, I find here on page 279: "While the various parts of Aristotle's *Politics*[xii] cannot be dated exactly, we know that they belong to different periods of Aristotle's life." That I would say we do not know. The man who has assured Voegelin that we know is the late Werner Jaeger,[xiii] who died a few weeks ago, a German classical scholar. But you only have to read the very sober criticism of Jaeger's construction in the preface or the introduction of Barker, his translation of the *Politics*,[xiv] to see that this is not something which can be assumed. Jaeger tried to construe the genesis of Aristotle's philosophy in general and of his political philosophy in particular. This kind of concern with genesis is part of this general concern with history which is characteristic of a whole school of thought with which Voegelin is in fundamental agreement.

Now one subject which I will take up at the end of this course, which is inevitable, is the relation of Aristotle's thought to Plato. Here that plays a very great role in Voegelin's argument. In a word, Plato had certain expectations of a rejuvenation or revitalization of Greek life. These expectations failed, and Aristotle's doctrine is based on this historical experience, the failure of the Platonic expectations. According to Voegelin it led to the separation of ethics and politics. That there is a separation of ethics and politics in Aristotle is in a way undeniable: two different books, one is called the *Ethics* and one is called the *Politics*. And there is no such separation of an ethics and a politics in Plato. The question is whether the explanation—whether you have to go back to something which is fundamentally only an hypothesis, namely, the failure of Plato's expectations, explains that. That is a long question, and I would have to discuss Voegelin's analysis of Plato, which I cannot do here, [of] what Plato's expectations are. I will limit myself only to this question, what the separation of ethics and politics means.

Now if that means that we must make a distinction between the virtues and the political institutions meant to produce or to be helpful to the emergence of virtue, this of course is as Platonic as Aristotelian. And you only have to read the first book of Plato's *Laws*, 631b following to c, [to see] that it is perfectly clear in Plato's mind: here you have a standard, a view to which you legislate, and this is the perfect human being having these and these virtues. That must come first, and then you can devise institutions. That is exactly the same in both thinkers. But it is true Plato did not present an ethics in a separate book. Both in the *Republic* and in the *Politics*, there are[7] [discussions of] both ethical and political [things]. But the reason is this (and this I can only state here dogmatically, I will speak of it later on): there is no moral virtue [in Plato]. Moral and ethical is of course the same—I mean the distinction which is now made according to

---

[xii] In original: "while the various *logoi* of the collections cannot be"

[xiii] Werner Jaeger (1888-1961), classical scholar. (He taught at the University of Chicago from 1936 until 1939, when he went to Harvard, where he remained for the rest of his career.) Strauss is referring to Jaeger's *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* (London: Oxford Universitiy Press, 1962). [Werner Jaeger, Aristoteles, Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923)]

[xiv] Ernest Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle* (1946).

which a drug store can be unethical but certain sexual practices are immoral, that is a more recent distinction. Ethical is simply the Greek form of what . . . moral. This only in passing. I have said of someone that I regarded him an immoral man, and then I was asked: Did he commit adultery? And I only meant he was a cheat. Then I learned that this term meant different things in this country. So moral or ethical virtue, the very term does not occur in Plato. One can say that Aristotle is the discoverer of moral or ethical virtue in contradistinction to the other virtues. Why that is so in a question which I plan to take up later.

Now let us come to Voegelin's discussion of the third book of the *Politics*. I must read to you a few passages, first, page 324 following:

> In the economy of the *Politics,* Book III holds the key position. It is the bridge between the introductory exploration of the nature of the polis and the subsequent nomothetic application to concrete cases. The field of action for the lawgiver is the *politeia* or *politeuma,* variously translated as constitution, kind of government, or form of government. Aristotle himself defines the *politeia* as the order (*taxis*) of the householders of a polis (1274b38).

I mention this already now, this is a mistranslation. Aristotle says here this is an order of those who inhabit the city. Inhabitants, not the householders.

> The best translation would be "order of the polis," and the varieties would best be named "types of order"; hence we shall use these terms whenever the conventional language of "constitution" or "form of government" could lead to misunderstandings. Such caution in the use of terms is necessary because in Book III Aristotle's concepts undergo certain changes of meaning. The term "polis," for instance, is not used in the same sense as in [the previous books—LS][xv] when the "nature of the polis" was the topic. In Book I the polis was a community of which the "parts" could be determined as household and village. In Book III the polis is still a composite thing, but household and village have been replaced by the citizens[xvi] as its parts. [That is absolutely correct—LS] . . . This is the definition which answers the opening question of Book III: "What really is the polis?" And the question must be asked because Aristotle is now in search of the polis which is the object of the "statesman's and lawgiver's activity." The lawgiver's polis [meaning what Aristotle discusses in book 3 and following—LS] is not the philosopher's polis [what Aristotle allegedly discussed in book 1—LS] . . . The distinction between nature and order [nature in the first book and order in the third book—LS], between a philosopher's and a lawgiver's polis leads into theoretical difficulties which Aristotle could not dissolve—[xvii]

[xv] In original: "as in Books I and II"

[xvi] Voegelin adds (*polites*).

[xvii] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle*, in *Collected Works* (1999), v. 16, 324-25. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted brief portions of the text while reading.

That is the initial statement at this point. Now what is the basis for it? Aristotle begins in book 1, obviously it is the beginning of the book, but it is also true there is a new beginning at the beginning of book 3. These two beginnings are described by Voegelin. In the first book, at the beginning he speaks of nature of the *polis*, and in the third book he speaks of the order of the *polis*. Differently stated, and somewhat closer to what Aristotle taught, at the beginning of the first book Aristotle speaks of the household and village as parts of the *polis*, and at the beginning of book 3 he speaks of the citizen as part of the *polis*. This statement is closer to what happens, but it is not quite correct because Aristotle does not call the household and the village parts of the *polis* in the first book. He might have done so, but in fact he doesn't do it. What is the meaning of the discussion at the beginning of the first book? Aristotle makes it perfectly clear: there had been people who said that there is no essential difference between the household or family and the *polis*: the *polis* is only a large family, or the household is a small *polis*. Plato was one of these people who in a way said that, [but] he doesn't mention the names there. The first task for Aristotle is to make clear that there is an essential difference between the household and the *polis*, number one. That is however the same thing as showing that the *polis* is by nature. The meaning of this sentence is also [that] the *polis* as *polis* is by nature and not merely as an enlarged family or village. By nature there is a difference between the *polis* and the smaller association.

Now after having made clear the essential difference between *polis* and household (and the village is not very interesting here), the critique concerns the household and the *polis*. Aristotle discusses the subject of the management of the household in the rest of book 1. Then he does what he also does in other works: he gives a survey of older views regarding politics. That he does in book 2. In book 3 the political argument proper begins. At the beginning of book 1 Aristotle was only concerned with establishing, so to say, that there is a subject of politics, that the *polis* is something by itself essentially different from the village. The distinction between nature and order which Voegelin finds here, nature in book 1 and order in book 3, simply doesn't exist. Now what is the point? Voegelin says that this distinction between the nature of the *polis* and the order of the *polis*, a distinction which is not Aristotelian, destroys the understanding of the substance which is, as it were, both. I read to you: "'The polis is the same chiefly with regard to its *politeia*.' If this argument were followed to its conclusion, the polis as a society in history would disappear." What he means is the continuity of the *polis*, in spite of the change, would disappear. Quoting Aristotle: "Whether a polis is bound in justice to fulfill its engagements when it changes its governmental order [*politeia*], is another question." Aristotle says at the end of this discussion—you know, the practical question from which he started, where people make a distinction between the *polis* and the regime: the oligarchs made that contract or treaty; we didn't do it, therefore it doesn't bind us. "In this sentence," Voegelin says, "the polis is again the subject which retains its identity through the changes of the types of order—but now the question of the debts, which under this assumption should be paid, is left dangling. A reconciliation of these various theoretical intentions is impossible."[xviii] Do you see what he means, the question of the debts? Do you remember that? Otherwise you will not understand my reasoning. I repeat. The starting point of Aristotle is his observation: change of regime, denial of binding

[xviii] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 326.

character of debt contracted by the previous regime, with the ground that that was not done by the *polis* but by the former regime. [8]Russia in 1918 is the nearest example[xix] — no, not the nearest example, there are others, but the most famous example. That was done by the Tsar, not by the Russian people.

Let us consider that for one moment. First the question, the continuity. Aristotle doesn't say that the *polis* is an entirely new *polis*—say, that the Russia after the communist revolution has nothing whatever in common [with Tsarist Russia]—he only says that the change in regime is the most important change which occurs. The reason is very simple, because Aristotle regards the difference between good and bad as the most important distinction. Take the simplest and clearest case. If a society dedicated to virtue becomes dedicated to vice, no change in that society is comparable to that. Whether they become richer, or larger, or change various technical things is not comparable in importance. That is a very defensible point of view, I would say. But let us come back to the question of debts. According to Voegelin, Aristotle must maintain that every change in regime creates an entirely new *polis* and must, on the other hand, admit the fact that the *polis* survives, because obviously in a way it is the same *polis* before the change and after the change. And Voegelin believes that Aristotle cannot solve this problem at this level. I think that is utterly wrong. Aristotle says this is another question, a question not belonging here. Why does it not belong? Answer: because it is a legal question. A legal question is a question which as such in this context is not political, which is not relative to the regime. There are such politically neutral questions; I could prove this by parallels in the *Politics*. It is a politically neutral question. But how can it be decided? I make one simple assumption, that Aristotle was a sane man. And how would a sane man decide such a question? Say a tyrant contracted debt. The tyrant is deposed or executed, and what about the debts? It seems obvious: if the tyrant contracted the debt in order to have a ball, to feather his nest or whatever you call it, of course the debt will not be paid. Then should these bankers, the fellows who financed this gay life, take the responsibility for that? But if the tyrant used the money, or part of it, for beautifying the city and generally for the advantage of the *polis*, and the city is going to enjoy these advantages for the future, an honest city will pay the debt. That is what Aristotle means. It is really a legal question . . . the center of the political argument. Now another passage which I have to read.

> Aristotle is concerned with the tension between the one nature of the polis and the many varieties of actualization. From the speculation on this tension emerges the possibility that the form (*eidos*) of order can be brought to coincide maximally with the nature (*physis*) of the *polis*. We, thus, arrive at the notion of the best polis as the polis whose order (*politeia*) will be an organization of the free and equal men, that is, of the society of mature men as described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While such maximal coincidence is desirable, the political scientist must

[xix] In January 1918, the Soviet government suspended foreign debt servicing. In February 1918 it decreed the repudiation of all tsarist debts as well as the debts contracted by the Provisional Government in order to continue the war from February to November 1917. At the same time, it decided to confiscate all the assets held by foreigners in Russia and restore them to the national estate. Russian public debt amounted to £930 million (roughly 50 percent of GDP) in 1913.

> recognize that the historical[xx] [cities—LS] fall far short of such perfection; in fact, Aristotle admits on occasion that none of the 158 constitutions examined by him live up to his standards . . . The problem of politics is not exhausted by an exploration of the nature of the polis; the metaphysical inquiry [namely, into the nature of the *polis*—LS] must be supplemented by what we may call a sociology of politics.[xxi]

Now let us try to understand that. It is quite . . . Voegelin makes use of a distinction between nature and order, and this distinction[9] [between] nature and order [10]he ascribes to Aristotle. And this he identifies with the distinction between nature and form, *eidos*. That you must keep in mind. The natural *polis* is the perfect *polis*, but all actual cities are imperfect. Now the latter, by the way, is correct. Aristotle regarded practically all cities of which he knew—no, all cities of which he knew—as imperfect, [that] is undeniable. But that has nothing with that. What Voegelin apparently doesn't know is this, a very simple thing. According to Aristotle the nature of a thing is, to say it in a very simplified statement, form plus matter (that he forgot), just as a human being consists of form and matter. One can easily illustrate that. For example, in primary analysis, part of the matter is, say, our stomachs. A human stomach is not a dog's stomach. From Aristotle's point of view we have not understood the human stomach fully until we see how only the human stomach could contribute to the life of a man as distinguished from the life of a dog and any other animal. But the form, man's rationality, is that which governs the whole thing. But man is not merely the form, he is also the matter. This is easily understood. But the difficulty which exists is undeniable, is this: that most dogs are normal. That is at least what Aristotle believed. In other words, you find dogs with two heads or one foot or so on, but the normal dog has two eyes, two ears, and so on. But most cities are abnormal. That is what Aristotle says. You find almost everywhere a normal dog and nowhere a normal city, and yet he says the city is by nature. That is a paradoxy which cannot be denied. And perhaps Aristotle would even say that most human beings are abnormal, by which he does not mean that most human beings have a bodily defect of one kind or another; that [is] not [it], but [they are abnormal] measured by the norm of a truly human life. We could say that every dog leads a truly doggish life. There are very few human beings one could say who live a truly a human life. That is so, and that I think is not Aristotle's fault.

Another indication of the same point. On page 331 following, he says Aristotle must make three conceptual distinctions. "In the first place, the observation of revolutions, as well as of the corresponding changes of constitutions in a polis, motivated the distinction between nature and order of the polis." That is not correct. Aristotle makes the distinction between the form and the mater of the *polis*, not between the nature and the order. That is simply misleading.[xxii] —it was the same thing as I said before, where he[xxiii] mistranslated this passage. The *politeia* is the order of the householders. Aristotle means the human beings inhabiting the *polis*, that is the matter of the *polis*. You must have human beings,

---

[xx] In original: "poleis"
[xxi] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 328.
[xxii] The tape was changed at this point.
[xxiii] That is, Voegelin.

and then there must be a specific form imposed on them. That doesn't mean in itself, by the way, something vicious or coercive; it means only they must be directed toward a characteristic goal: freedom, virtue, wealth, or whatever it may be. Otherwise they are not truly members of a political society.

> Once the order of the constitution was established as a category, it had to be the order of something; and the constitution acquired the function of a "form" in relation to the citizens as its "matter." [That is not true; the human beings are its matter. That makes all the difference—LS] This second distinction between the constitutional form and the citizens led to the difficulty that a good number of men somehow belong to a polis but cannot be classified as citizens if the citizen be defined as the "matter" that fits into the constitutional "form."[xxiv]

That is not recognizable in what Aristotle says. Aristotle means something very simple. This shoemaker here, an inhabitant of the city, is a citizen in a democracy and not a citizen in an oligarchy. Whenever you look back into the history of this country, we never had such severe property qualifications, but in any other country you would immediately see that, that this is so. The citizen is always relative to the regime, but a human being is not relative to a regime. The shoemaker doesn't cease to be a human being if the regime is changed, but he ceases to be a citizen. Then there is a third distinction. The third distinction Aristotle made is between a good man and a good citizen. But that is absolutely evident. If citizen is relative to the regime, then good citizen must be relative to the regime. If something is relative to something else, then that something qualified is also relative to that something else. And the proof can again be given very empirically. A good citizen of the Weimar Republic had to be a bad citizen of the Hitler regime, and vice versa, because a good citizen means to be dedicated to the end of the regime. I mean, if someone is dedicated, say, to the end of Hitler's regime, he cannot be dedicated to liberal democracy, and vice versa. That is an empirical fact. And[11] [Voegelin] goes on as follows. As a consequence of all these things,

> the nature of the polis could no longer be linked with the nature of man by the anthropological principle which Aristotle had inherited from Plato; and a perspective would open on a possibility of human existence, in satisfactory modes of actualization of human nature, in societies of a type other than the polis.[xxv]

In other words, the difficulty into which Aristotle gets by identifying the perfect human association with the *polis* can only be solved by forgetting about the *polis* and finding a society of a type other than the *polis*. By this[12] Voegelin means a civilization or culture. If Voegelin would only say that the *polis* as described by Aristotle is a problematic thing, he would be correct. But that would not be a criticism of Aristotle; it would only bring out what Aristotle himself means. All the difficulties into which Aristotle gets do not prove in any way that societies of another type would solve the difficulty. What is the reason for Aristotle's failure? Now here he says, "Since nature and form[xxvi] are synonyms for

---

[xxiv] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 331-32.
[xxv] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 332.
[xxvi] Voegelin uses the Greek *physis* and *eidos*.

essence, the polis is a thing with two different essences."[xxvii] That is simply not true. Voegelin has not understood the Aristotelian doctrine regarding nature as a composite of form and matter, to say nothing of the fact that the distinction between nature and order, as based on the difference of the argument at the beginning of book 1 and book 3, is not in any way a basis for it. "The difficulties have their origin in the attempt to apply the ontological categories, which have been developed in [Aristotle's—LS] *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, without further clarification to the order of human existence in society . . . It should be amply clear that the ontological categories, developed on occasion of the enumerated models in *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, are not adequate instruments for the theoretization of order in society."[xxviii] What does this mean? Aristotle is a metaphysician. He has developed a metaphysical doctrine or system in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. There the distinction between form and matter plays a very great role. Then Aristotle transfers this distinction between matter and form blindly, as it were, to politics. But that is not true, and I would like to show how.

What is the *polis*? We would first have to know that. Now from Aristotle's point of view the *polis* can be only one of two things. It is either a natural being or it is an artifact, but in both cases the distinction between matter and form is evidently necessary. It is even clearer still in the case of the artifact than in the case of a natural thing. There is no such borrowing from a metaphysical system in Aristotle's *Politics*. Moreover, the key point: Aristotle's style of thinking is absolutely opposed to such schematization. If he did not on the basis of political things see the necessity of making the distinction between matter and form, in the case of political things Aristotle would not apply it. Nothing is clearer for Aristotle than that the world is of very great complexity and that the simple transfer of distinctions manifestly useful in one sphere to another sphere needs in each case a peculiar reasoning. The reasoning which Aristotle gives, taken entirely from political things, is the undeniable fact of change of regimes, of forms, while a matter subsists, [namely], the human beings, to say nothing of the walls of the city or the houses. But surely the human beings are the same, and yet the form is changed. And then the question is: What is the relative importance of these two elements, the matter or the form? Then Aristotle would say (and I only repeat what I have said before): What change can be more important than a change of the end to which the society is dedicated? Let the end first be virtue, and let the end then be vice: no change can be more fundamental. All changes of regime—from democracy into oligarchy, for example—reflect somehow this most fundamental of all changes, and therefore this is the key to understanding.

I believe I leave it at these remarks. There is one more passage which I might take up later . . . which I had partly to do for the sake of Mr. ____ and partly also because Voegelin's book is probably the leading book now in this field after Sabine's history of political thought,[xxix] which gradually fell into—I don't know how to express it, but it is a book which has gone through many editions; and things have changed, both the theoretical and the political situation have changed so profoundly since it was first

---

[xxvii] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 332.
[xxviii] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 333. Voegelin provides parenthetical references: "*Physics* (II, 3) and *Metaphysics* (I, 9 and XII, 3)."
[xxix] George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (1937).

published (in the 30's, I believe) that no changes of an editorial kind can help, and that it needs all the time. Voegelin in a way supplies that need. But in this case, in the case of Aristotle . . . the earlier book, *The New Science of Politics*, this question of Aristotle simply doesn't prove the point which he wants to make, that Aristotle's categories are fundamentally inadequate for understanding political society. Aristotle's categories may not be sufficient for understanding political things, but Voegelin's argument does not establish that.

Student: There is one point that you place a very heavy emphasis on which is crucial to saving the situation for Aristotle. That is that the form may change, but the matter remains the same. You used before the example that the good citizen of the Weimar Republic cannot be a good citizen of the Nazi regime. Now it seems that history is chock full of such good citizens of one regime who were very good citizens of any regime that followed, and that of course matter as physical entity subsists but had undergone profound enough changes so that it is a different kind of matter, insofar as purpose is concerned or in so far as ideology is concerned. Do you get my point? What kind of matter are you talking about?

LS: The same one that Aristotle is talking about, the human beings.

Student: But what does that mean? Does that mean human being as physical entity or what?

LS: If I knew what physical entity was, I could answer that. I mean, I believe [that] in these days when you speak of physical entity you mean an inanimate body, and human beings are not inanimate bodies. Pardon?

Student: Sometimes.

LS: Then they are dead . . . abstraction made from political . . . you do that. Is it not necessary to do that even if you look at the key case of a change of regimes? What is changed is only in the first place the laws have changed. His legal position may have altogether changed and he is expected to be dedicated to something to which he was not dedicated before, which is the opposite of that to which he was supposed to be dedicated before . . .

Student: Is it the same matter?

LS: Matter is truly relative. From another point of view, this man is of course form in many ways. You ultimately come back to what Aristotle calls prime matter, where there is no longer any consideration of man or of any living beings. Aristotle means by matter what is matter in the context, and here in the political context the subpolitical as such is matter. The subpolitical is that which includes many other forms or natures. Stick to the . . . and you will understand. The human beings are molded after the change of regimes in a different way than they were molded before. But there are so many questions. Aristotle knows that, that in a sense it makes sense to say: Sure, be dedicated

to one's country regardless of a change in regime. But if you think of interesting changes of regime and not of these perfectly nice ones, it means much more than that. Think of the change from Tsarist Russia to communist Russia. These are profound changes, and to be equally dedicated to both is impossible. You must not forget that our political categories, or moral categories, are in a way less political than Aristotle's, because we have a notion of general human decency which is not affected by the regime. There is such a thing, sure, but that underestimates the importance of the political. And these great changes which we have seen in our century have shown us that political changes are terribly important from the point of view of simple human decency. One cannot say that simple human decency is in no way affected. If a tolerably decent monarchy is replaced by a tolerably decent republic, you can say that decency is not affected, I grant you that, but not in the fundamental changes. Our political categories may be much too poor if they do not take into consideration the really fundamental changes.

Student: If men by nature tend toward their own excellence, is there any means of helping them achieve this excellence?

LS: . . . because man is by nature the rational animal, and therefore his perfection cannot be achieved without his own use of the reason. Nature is sometimes understood in the sense of what happens without reasoning . . . It is in this sense a natural process. But man's education cannot be in this sense natural. Education must be a rational process, but a process guided by nature, namely, taking into consideration what it means to be educated . . .

Student: From the Aristotelian standpoint?

LS: But you cannot speak of what is natural for a being without considering the nature of that being . . . Since man happens to be the rational animal, you must make a rather large allowance for reason. Is this so difficult to understand?

Student: Would the answer then be yes to my question, that anything which is successful—

LS: Of course not. If as the end result of that process you have a perfect gentleman and a mind that is well trained in all worthwhile things, then surely that is a success. But if you mean by success that he is not a criminal because he is not caught, then it would not be a success. You know there are people who are successful in that line. Success would have to be defined; and therefore when one speaks of the perfection of man, one . . . than when one speaks of success, because success is a wholly different thing. How can one understand what one wants to achieve . . . a calm, smoothly working from the social standpoint. When you speak of success, that does not exclude that. But you see the point is this: that brings up always the old question of means and ends, and the old question does the end sanctify every means. I believe that Aristotle would have answered that question just as Hegel did in his day. The end sanctifies every means compatible with that end. But if the means is really destructive of that end, it is of course not . . .

Student: If Aristotle says the *polis* changes into a new *polis*—

LS: Not simply, but in the most important respect. By the way, in order to make this clear, if Aristotle had meant that the *polis* is defined as it were only by the form or the regime, then two different democratic cities would be one city, or *n* democratic cities would be only one city because they are identical with regard to form. So you see how utterly necessary the matter is. The democratic cities of the North and the democratic cities in the South, even if they are identical in their regimes, are still different cities because their matter is different, just as human being A and human being B differ, though their perfection and form are the same, because they have different stomachs.

Student: My question is, how can we study, by Aristotelian concepts, the matter or the people from one regime to another to see what limitations are placed on the way the regime can change by the limitations of the people, peculiar to the character of the people which does not change?

LS: I don't wish to be nasty, otherwise I would say you haven't read books 4 to 6. That is where Aristotle shows, for example, you have a certain regime, say, democracy. Now he sees immediately as an empirical political scientist that this is too general, because there are various kinds, subdivisions of democracy. And he sees for example in one kind that there is a preponderance in the assembly of farmers, peasants, rural people; in another there is a preponderance of [an] urban poor population. These are two extremes. They are two entirely different democracies. That he shows beautifully. There are the rural people, living out in the villages and towns. They can't come to the assembly every day; they can come only very rarely, and therefore they want to have an order in which four assemblies a year are sufficient. But such four assemblies cannot do more than elect officials and audit the officials . . . Therefore it will invariably happen in rural democracies that the upper classes will become the elected officials. But in a city or urban democracy which might have the naughty conceit . . . to give them pay for their attendance, they can go to the assembly every day, and in such a democracy the common people will be actually in control.

Aristotle developed at great length these so-called sociological things, but he always used them with a view to their political meaning. They are in a way meaningless if you do not look at them politically, because the human meaning depends on the character of the society as a whole, i.e., on the character of the goals to which the society as a whole is dedicated. Surely it is interesting to see the difference in preponderance of occupations, but it becomes interesting only when you see what it means politically. What it means politically is the same as to say what it means in human terms, the ends to which society as a whole is dedicated. And to see this you have only to look at Aristotle, and at Thucydides, to see how the democracy changed in Athens and how these very excited people, the many Athenian shoemakers and so on who appeared in the assembly, and who had no other content but the only thing which gave them substance, so to speak, was: We are the lords of the Athenian empire, and if there is another small city on an island who[se inhabitants] don't jump when we blow the whistle, we are going to show them. And the large, the broader consideration: Is it wise to react to such little things in such a

violent manner? Is it not better for Athens to be a generous protector rather than a stern master? You know the famous story, when they destroyed cities and killed the males and sentenced the females into slavery or something. In other words, the passions, the emotions—the mass psychology, as they call it now—that is a very important consideration. In other words, if people lack this breadth, are not concerned with . . . that would be the ruin of democracy. Would this not be bad? Surely in modern democracies the situation is entirely different, because modern democracy is not direct democracy—that you must never forget—i.e., [there is] a fundamental distinction between the people and the government, whereas for Aristotle in a direct democracy the people is the government.

Student: Sir, I am wondering whether or not Aristotle's intellectual differentiation of matter and form ends up with a very serious problem in that not only is the philosopher excluded from the *polis* in the sense that he is opposed to the *demos* and is only a very particular case, but doesn't he provide legitimization from the aberrant *polis* in the very sense in which in *Natural Right and History* you condemn the positivists? You say the only nice thing about them is that they don't offer the same advice to tyrants that they offer to democracy. Yet Aristotle shows how aberrant societies like democracies and oligarchies and tyrannies can be built up. Now I realize that one can say in Aristotelian terms that this particular society was the most proper society under given conditions, but Aristotle shows how the conditions can be preserved. That is, if I were a democratic demagogue or a tyrant, I could look up in Aristotle and see how to solve my problems. I can save my society. And thus he becomes the moralizer attempting to advance imperialists, or he becomes simply locked up in the ivory tower of knowledge where he is no good and where he leaves the rest of the world to become the playground of the Machiavellis and the Bismarcks.

LS: I understand where you get this impression, where Aristotle in book 5—you know, where he gives recipes, where people find there is already Machiavelli's principle in the section on tyranny. But what is the general character of the Aristotelian recipe? If you want to keep your bad regime, even a tyranny, be as decent as possible. That he says to the tyrant, that he says to the demos, that he says to the oligarch— the constant advice, and based not merely on preaching but on practical considerations. After all, the tyrant doesn't want merely to throw his weight around. You know? But even if he does that, he wants to throw his weight around for a long time.

Student: Is Aristotle then giving bad advice, say to a man like Stalin, who says, "I will let them think"? Here he is either giving bad advice—that is, not-accurate advice—to Stalin or—

LS: Aristotle's advice to all bad regimes is to try to be as decent as is compatible with your fundamentally wrong form.

Student: That is bad advice.

LS: Why is it bad advice?

Student: It is bad advice because it may be necessary in order to preserve the conditions of the tyrannical society to appear to be as nice as you can—

LS: No, no, mere appearance will not do. People see—in such crude matters, people see through the appearance.

Student: But this involves another problem in Aristotle, in that through the differentiation of form and matter he excludes the problem of the very ordering of the soul, that is, the matter is not matter *qua* matter, but it is something more than matter. It is the form itself. It is the genesis of the form. Thus Stalin can brainwash the masses.

LS: Let us forget about the form and the matter, because it is not very clarifying in its great generality. But you mustn't forget this one thing, which I believe plays a great role in the thought of our day. Such people like Aristotle, and there were quite a few others, were very modest. That is to say, they generally speaking abhorred extreme measures, even if the extreme measures served a good end. They loathed the habits acquired in these extreme measures. I mean, Aristotle would not blame people if they killed tyrants—you know, in an unbearable situation they have a certain right, in a way. And yet the fact that this is done in ways which are clearly not orderly legal proceedings isn't a good habit. For us, the word revolution is almost a word of praise, because there have been some revolutions in modern times, especially in this country, which by the way were almost as much a form of war as of revolution, formally speaking, which were salutary, and which in former times . . . revolution . . . Do you know what that means? Sedition. That is just like the word "parties," which replaced the former word "factions." Certain habits, practices, which in the past were regarded as morally very dangerous have now become simply expected. We have to take this into consideration and to rethink it. That does not necessarily mean that Aristotle is right, but that is the minimum, that we argue on the same subject on which he speaks.

There is another point. Let us assume that aristocracy as Aristotle meant it, the rule of gentlemen, who are public-spirited and who never misuse their power for low things like their gain, is very rare—not intrinsically impossible, but so rare that Aristotle didn't know of an example. In other words, if we have always imperfect regimes, is not the maximum which is practically possible, which a teacher like Aristotle could do, to give the given imperfect regime which was willing to listen to him the advice to be more decent in this and that important area than they would be without this advice? I mean, let us not have too-extravagant expectations. Aristotle is an eminently sober man. But he is not sober in that cheap way that he knows only the closest objectives and does not know what would be ultimately best for society. He is both: he knows the perfect solution for which we might wish or pray and also the enormous difficulties of getting that way, and therefore he tries to give advice to ruling people as we ordinarily find them. Aristotle, even when he speaks about tyranny and says how could we preserve it—and the general rule is: Think of long duration and not merely for short enjoyment, and generally speaking, a nonoppressive, a noninsulting rule would be better than the opposite conditions. When he makes this remark, he makes it perfectly clear that tyranny is a

monstrosity, whereas the present-day social scientist would say it is absurd to speak of tyranny as a monstrosity: the value judgments supporting tyranny are as defensible or as indefensible as the value judgments supporting rule of law and these things. That is an enormous difference. That is surely true, that Aristotle thought the tension between philosophy and the *polis* can't be overcome. But in order not to condemn prematurely you must consider the fact that the union of philosophy and politics has been achieved in modern times through technology based on modern science. The immediate consequence that follows is the possibility of thermonuclear extinction. Before this danger has been completely overcome, I would regard it as an open question. Even if it should be overcome, still one could say something which requires such a danger, such a hairsbreadth's escape, is not so manifestly a dictate of . . . I believe that what distinguishes us as a generation is this, that we have seen with our own eyes that these great and fantastic promises of modern technology are accompanied with the threat of incredible disaster that some very wise men in the past (you know, da Vinci was one of them) smelled at the beginning, and that now has become common knowledge. It is precisely because we have felt this shock that the wise men of old appear somewhat less as old fogies than they appeared in the nineteenth century, though even then some of them could see that the greatest promoter of technology is war, because there the incentive is so enormous the restraints are less. That is the difficulty. We meet next Monday.

---

[1] Deleted "If you have done your homework, i.e., read Aristotle's *Politics*, you would have no difficulty. In this connection, I should mention that I cannot meet this class next Wednesday, but I will be back on Monday. Now the theme of the *Politics* is, as I have said, in the first place the polis and not the Greek city-state. Q: When will the class run until? A: We have an eight-week teaching period, so by simple addition— Q: Did you say there won't be a class this Wednesday? A: Yes. There will not be a class. But I will make up for that at the end of the quarter."
[2] Deleted "that"
[3] Deleted "Aristotle applies"
[4] Deleted "he"
[5] Deleted "something else"
[6] Deleted "when you think"
[7] Deleted "both ethical and political"
[8] Deleted "like"
[9] Deleted "he equates"
[10] Deleted "and this distinction he equates, nature, and order"
[11] Deleted "he"
[12] Deleted "he means"

Session 12: 13 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: I have a question. I think I will first discuss that question, by Mr. _____.

> The aim of the *polis* is said to be to make its members good and just, or the *polis* is an association of households or clans aimed at providing its members self-sufficient existence. While the *polis* grows for the sake of mere life, it exists for the sake of the good life. But perfection is not within the reach of all members, even members of the best *polis*. Therefore, in what sense could it be said that the best *polis* aims at the best life or the perfect existence? Is it not much more that the best *polis*, insofar as it aims at a perfect existence attainable only by a few, aims not at the common good but at the good attainable by the few? The *polis* can then only be said equivocally to aim at perfection. Is it not much more true to say that in the best *polis* that Aristotle describes, the ruling citizens rule simply for the sake of perpetuating their own kind?

That is a very good question, but I would divide my answer into two parts and therefore say, first, let us assume that Mr. ____'s premise is correct, that the *polis* aims not at the common good but at the good attainable by the few. Assuming that this were so, is the fact that the *polis* is determined in its outlook by the best men ruling in broad daylight and the other members of society defer to them, is this not also for the benefit of the rest? Are they not better men by deferring to the rest than by not deferring?

Student: I think that Aristotle tries to substantiate that view by positing a potentiality in the men who can't achieve perfection. In the *De Anima* he talks about potential and actual, and therefore the merchant qua merchant doesn't achieve perfection, but he has a potentiality for that.

LS: Surely Aristotle makes always a distinction, which I think can only with difficulty be avoided, between the potential and the actual. But there are various kinds of potentiality. [1]For example, to take an Aristotelian example, the baby is a potential mathematician. At ten years [of age] he is also a potential mathematician. At twenty years, if he is asleep, he is also a potential mathematician because he is not actually a mathematician. So there are various kinds [of potentiality]. Now if you take the same man, [who is] not able to become a perfect gentleman for whatever reason, [2][it makes a difference] if he is the member of a society in which he will habitually defer to the best man or if he is a member of a society in which he does not habitually defer to the best men. You can call this in both causes a type of potentiality, but it is surely a different type.

Student: Let us return to the position of the merchant for a moment. If a man is such that the best he could achieve were something like being a merchant, is not Aristotle in fact superimposing upon the facts of the world the fact that this man can't become more than

---

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 45-49; *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), 298-99.

a merchant—a wish, that is to say, that the man should look to the best? If the poor merchant is not capable of the best, why should he be concerned with it?

LS: Surely that is the posture which many people take: Whatever is not accessible to me, however good in itself, I will somehow denigrate. That is an unfortunate element of man, but there are some people also, we must say, who do not take this lowering view, who say they are not capable of certain very high things and yet have a decent respect for that.

Student: But what kind of respect is it if they have no clear idea of what it is? For all they know, it may all be merely a myth.

LS: There is a deference which is entirely due to the external pomp of high position. That is not very good. There can be one which is due to more substantial considerations. For example, observing how such a man behaves in critical situations of his own life or of the life of society, look at the many people who looked up to Churchill: they were wholly unable to do any of the deeds which Churchill did. You cannot say it is mere ignorance. It is in a way ignorance because most of them would not have been able perhaps to analyze or articulate it properly, but if one is not able to articulate something, one is not for this reason simply ignorant of it. It is a kind of ignorance, but it is surely not mere myth, mere ideology, however you want to call it. But I have another answer. I will take that up later. Aristotle does construct a *polis* in which only perfect gentlemen are members of that *polis*—you know, [in] the seventh and eighth books—and in this case one could say that this *polis* as a whole is dedicated to virtue or excellence. In other words, this was a good question because it was so clearly formulated, but it was not a very difficult question. The difficulties to which Aristotle's teaching are exposed, I believe, lie elsewhere. I will try to speak of that today if I am given a chance.

I have devoted some meetings to a discussion of the proposition that the theme of Aristotle's *Politics* is the *polis*, but I went beyond that last time by saying that the theme proper of Aristotle is not the *polis* but the *politeia*, what I translated by "regime." I would like to elaborate this a bit more today. The Aristotelian political science is an analysis of the various regimes. It is therefore fundamentally different from certain modern doctrines, modern political philosophies which can be described as theories of the state. They do not have this plural[ity] which you have in Aristotle. Aristotle starts from the political proper. This is the divisive or the controversial. You know of course that there is one meaning of politicking in which it has a merely derogatory meaning: This is politics, hence it is not honest. This points to something very serious, that the political proper is the divisive. It needn't be divisive in this particular society (that is another matter), but it is in principle divisive, as I will gradually make clear. The politically divisive is distinguished from the politically neutral, of which there are two kinds. First, what we call the merely technical. Let us take the case of a society whose being or survival depends on an irrigation system. Then it will be a major task of that government to take care of the irrigation system regardless of what kind of government it is. But there is something else. The irrigation system as such is nothing political, it is subpolitical. But there are things which are closer to the political and that are even political and yet politically neutral: these are the things which are common to all regimes. For example,

there is no regime and has never been a regime which was not compelled to defend itself by force. This force is in quiet times dormant, but it is always in the background. This is common to all regimes. The political proper is that[3] [which] is peculiar to this and that kind of regime. This is what Aristotle has in mind when speaking of the regime.

There is a variety of regimes. We can also say there is a variety of spirits which can act in a society, or a variety of ends to which the society as a whole is dedicated. The difference of the ends corresponds to the difference of the preponderant parts of the society. The preponderant part of the society is not necessarily the majority. That is only one form of preponderance; there are others. There may be societies which have no common end—as some people say, no common good, no public interest. I refer to Bentley, *Process of Government*[ii] and the group theories in present-day American political science: there are only particular interests or individual interests as ends. This is frequently said today. But this very fact, that the groups or the individuals should have free play, that the government should only be a broker, this kind of freedom of the group or equality of the groups or individuals is the end of the society as a whole. Then freedom and equality is the end, and nothing else beyond that. There is no society without an end to which it is dedicated.

Aristotle puts an emphasis on the variety of regimes, as distinguished from the modern doctrines which speak of the state or something like it. A good example of the modern doctrine is for example Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The recognition of the variety of regimes is the opposite of what we may call doctrinairism. In different circumstances or conditions, different regimes are required. There are conditions favorable to monarchy, there are conditions favorable to democracy, and so on. There is not the one solution to the political problem valid at all times and in all places. Yet while Aristotle holds this view, he is not what is now called a relativist, because there is an order of rank among the various regimes. All regimes are indeed relative to conditions, one can say that. But Aristotle doesn't stop there. He addresses the question to the very conditions: Are the conditions favorable or unfavorable to the excellence of man? That is the difference between Aristotle and any form of relativism. That Aristotle talks about something which is and which is very important, we have immediate evidence for that today. Any political phenomenon occurring today in any country points to that overall conflict between liberal democracy and communism. I don't have to go into any purely domestic affairs anywhere, because there is today no longer any domestic affair in any far away country or small country which is not linked to that global conflict. But liberal democracy and communism, these are things that Aristotle means by regimes: overall orders of society determining a particular character of government, but more than that, determining the end to which the society as a whole is dedicated.

And this not only true today. Let us go back to 1830 and the following decades in Europe, where you had another conflict, not comparable in violence to the present-day conflict but very powerful nevertheless, the conflict which we call the conflict between the oligarchic republic and the democratic republic. For example, in 1830 in France, this was formally a constitutional monarchy, but what was peculiar to it was a severe

[ii] Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government* (1908).

limitation of the suffrage so that the country as constituted by law consisted of a very small percentage of the adult males. In certain parts of the world—I mention Germany, Russia, China—there was an issue until the beginning of the First World War, still somewhat old-fashioned: monarchy versus republic. Let us never forget the fact that around 1900 the largest part of the globe was ruled monarchically, that the issue monarchy versus republic was a very powerful issue until the end of the First World War.

Now of course it is not as clear in all times. If we turn, for example, to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we see that what was in the foreground is not a conflict of regimes, monarchies, republics, oligarchies, democracies, or liberal democracy versus communism. [4]At that time, the central political fact [was] the religious wars or the reform wars.[iii] The groups contesting were not political groups proper but religious groups, of which there were many kinds, including a certain extreme wing in favor of religious tolerance on religious grounds. But there was also another group of people particularly well known in France, called there *Les Politiques*, the political men. They tried to solve the religious conflict of their age on purely political grounds. You find it well presented from an unsympathetic point of view in the history of political thought of the sixteenth century by J. W. Allen, one of the best books in that field.[iv] They, for example, took this view. If you have a society in which the majority or almost everyone is Catholic, of course the government will support Catholicism by all means at its disposal. But if a considerable part of the population has become Protestant, as it was in France at that time, then a certain amount of tolerance is indicated. In other words, the religious question is decided on grounds of mere expediency. There may be situations in which a perfect tolerance, an absolute tolerance is indicated, then we do it. These we call the *Politiques*, but these people precisely were those acting in the spirit of Aristotle, that no transpolitical issue must interfere with the political problems proper. A political society, if conceived as subservient to religion, i.e., to one particular religion, is in a diseased state. This was the classic premise of the politicians, of the *Politiques*. It was stated in the Middle Ages with great power by Marsilius of Padua, early fourteenth century.[v] He presented this on the basis of Aristotle himself.

Now this indicates the fundamental question at which we arrive in analyzing Aristotle's *Politics*, and I think this is only confirmed by the experience of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in particular. The issue is *polis* or culture, the modern concept of culture which in its richest meaning asserts that the *polis* must be in the service of something higher than it, namely, a religion. This, to repeat, is not an assertion that Aristotle is right in this matter, but it is only a statement of what the issue is. This is the genuine issue. Differently stated, Aristotle's *Politics* and its analysis of the six regimes and their various subdivisions is surely insufficient for understanding the modern conflict. I think the usual criticisms of Aristotle, if they would not go beyond saying that, would be perfectly justified, but what they overlook, these criticisms, is this. It seems to me that by understanding the premises of Aristotle and therewith the alternatives to these

---

[iii] That is, the wars of the Reformation.

[iv] J. W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (1928).

[v] Marsilius of Padua (1275-1342). In *Defensor pacis*, Marsilius argued that the pope was not the source of governmental power; rather, it came from the people.

Aristotelian premises, we understand the modern conflict in principle much better than we otherwise do because we see an alternative to the modern conflict. We see it in a broader perspective.

I think there is one fundamental premise of Aristotle which is at variance with all specifically modern political thought. If we want to understand modern political thought thoroughly we have to view these modern premises in the light of the Aristotelian alternative. The Aristotelian premise can be stated very simply. There is a fundamental tension between philosophy and the *demos*—*demos*, the common people, from which the word democracy is derived. That means the highest life according to Aristotle is the theoretical life, the life devoted to contemplation. This in his view is inaccessible to the mentality of the many. That majority includes a minority which can be thought to be receptive to the humanizing influence of philosophy. This minority within the majority is what Aristotle means by the gentlemen. This is in principle why he favors aristocracy beyond all other regimes. The alternative to Aristotle is therefore the view that there is a fundamental harmony between philosophy and the *demos*. This leads to two consequences with which we are familiar. The first is that science or philosophy—the distinction between science and philosophy is a very recent thing—is for the sake of human power, in order to relieve man's estate. In other words, the consequence of this first difference is the development of what we may call the technological society. The second consequence is the belief in the possibility of popular enlightenment, so that the opinions felt by the philosophers or the scientists would be shared by all members of the society. Popular enlightenment and the outgrowth of this is what is now called ideology. After people found out that the true doctrine—namely, of the Enlightenment, eighteenth century—was not true and they saw[5] that this kind of society was in need of some overall view shared by the citizen body (but whether or not the view is true is not important), they developed, as we now call it, the notion of ideologies. The societies of premodern times are neither technological nor ideological. I really think that one should use these terms with some care. Now these two things, the technological and the ideological elements, or the popular enlightenment for that matter, [6][are] the common basis of the present-day conflict between liberal democracy and communism as well as fascism. This common basis can only be understood in contrast to classical political philosophy; it can only be understood therefore on the basis of classical political philosophy. It is a radical modification of Aristotelian thought and therefore can only be understood on the basis of Aristotle.

I have here by some accident another illustration of what I have in mind, showing the actuality of Aristotle's analysis in spite of these enormous difficulties. This is an article by Bertrand de Jouvenel, a French publicist, "A New Age of the Principate." The principate was a form of government established by Augustus at the end of the Roman civil wars, and the fact which[7] [de Jouvenel] observes is an amazing increase in monarchies all over the world. I read to you a few passages and then will bring out the difference between this analysis and the Aristotelian analysis.

> If we look at present around ourselves, what strikes us is that we find in almost every country a dominant figure, a central personage, who is served by ministers

> whom he can change, who therefore has the character of unique chief of the executive, and who, besides, in many cases, can make vote for the legislative elections, who then is at least as powerful in his country as the American President and in many cases even more so. A primacy of this kind cannot properly be described in terms of constitutional powers. This or that established magistracy may very well serve as support for this primacy. The legal knowledge of what belongs to this magistracy does not exhaust the political understanding of the situation. This situation ought to be named principate.[vi]

He is thinking of course not only of Khrushchev and Tito,[vii] but also of such figures as Adenauer,[viii] who has a kind of power which no German chancellor, not even Bismarck, had of course until the last election. Now this is a monarchic situation in the descriptive sense of the word, because the major decisions are taken there by a single man, and this defines monarchy in opposition to republics, whether aristocratic or democratic. In other words, what we observe is a turn away from republican forms of government to a monarchic one, although to a monarchic government of a new kind.

One must make a distinction between the form of a society and the form of government. A French writer of the nineteenth century, [Tocqueville], asserted that the social state marches more and more toward equality, but he contrasted with this irreversible march the to and fro of the political societies. The political regime is subject to changes which are inexplicable by the social revolution we know. What this means in the context is this. There is no fundamental social change which has taken place but a political change, a political change toward this principate, toward a new kind of monarchy. What is here implied to some extent is I believe the distinction between political, and therefore superficial, and social revolution. This is of course the very opposite of the Aristotelian view. Aristotle would say the fundamental changes are the political changes, not the nonpolitical social changes.

Now what are the premises of this distinction between the political as superficial and the social? We see this most clearly in the most elaborate form of this doctrine, namely, Marxism. Marxism stands and falls by the prospect of the withering away of the state. That means Marxism stands and falls by the view that the political can be dispensed with. Hitherto it could not, and [it] cannot for the time being, but in principle it can. But Marxism of course also says, as I mentioned, that this will happen only at the end. For the time being we have dictatorship of the proletariat, which is of course a political thing; in fact, the dictatorship of the Communist Party, and still more precisely of the leaders of the party. So what we can know of Marxism as distinguished from the unknown future is that the so-called social revolution is in fact a political revolution. [8][De Jouvenel] states,

---

[vi] We were unable to find the text from which Strauss is reading. It is possible that a later version of it appeared as "The Principate." See *The Nature of Politics: Selected Essays of Bertrand de Jouvenel*, ed. Dennis Hale and Marc Landy (New York: Schocken Books, 1987). The article was first published in *Political Quarterly* 36 (1965): 20-51.

[vii] Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980), Yugoslav communist and leader of then-Yugoslavia from 1945 to 1980.

[viii] Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967), German Chancellor from 1949 to 1963.

furthermore, as a characteristic of the present-day prince, meaning the quasi-monarchic executive: "This prince of today is very careful not to call himself sovereign."[ix] In other words, his legal position differs radically from his factual position. His factual position is irregular. What de Jouvenel fears is [that] because this new monarchy has no clear legal basis, it is much more dangerous to liberty than the old absolute monarchy, say, in France, which was not as absolute as it seemed because there were many legal limitations. In other words, this new monarchy has no legitimating principle.

But what does this mean? Here we have the good fortune of having an explicit utterance straight from the horse's mouth, the horse in this case being Aristotle: *Politics*, book 3, 1286a2 to 3. Aristotle discusses here briefly one form of monarchy, namely, the form in which the king is in fact only a lifelong general. He says about this institution, the reflection about this kind of kingship belongs rather to law, to a legal investigation, than to the political investigation proper, for this institution can exist in all regimes. What does this mean? Grant that there is an increase in the power and the stature of the monarchic executive in all countries regardless of the differences of regimes. This rather shows it is a technical change, not a political change. That doesn't mean it is unimportant, but it doesn't go to the root of the matter. The political issue of our time is not whether such a strengthening of the executive is wise or unwise, that is a secondary question. The political issue of our time is this: what is that for which this concentration of power in the hands of an individualized—in other words, Adenauer's use, and Khrushchev's use, that is a question of the difference between liberal democracy and communism. It is an interesting remark which de Jouvenel makes, and surely one worth making, but it does not go to the root of the matter. I think the theoretical inadequacy of de Jouvenel's analysis is due to the crypto-Marxist belief that the fundamental changes are social, i.e., nonpolitical changes and not, as Aristotle maintains, the political changes. But this only by way of illustration.

I will add only one observation and then we can have a brief discussion before I turn to my next point. Now regarding Aristotle's thesis about the supremacy of the regime, one had only to consider the phenomenon now known as loyalty. The loyalty demanded of every citizen is not bare loyalty to the country, to the country irrespective of the regime, but to the country informed by the regime, by the constitution. A fascist or communist might claim that he undermines the Constitution of the United States out of loyalty to the United States. In his opinion, the Constitution of the United States is bad for the people of the United States. But his claim to be a loyal citizen will not be recognized. Someone might say the Constitution can constitutionally be changed so that the regime would cease to be a liberal democracy and become either fascist or communist, and that every citizen of the United States is now expected then to be loyal to fascism or communism. I think there are many people who assert this implicitly. But no one loyal to liberal democracy who knows what he is doing would teach this doctrine, precisely because it is apt to undermine loyalty to liberal democracy. Only if the regime is in a state of complete decay can its transformation into another regime become publically defensible.

[ix] See n. vi above.

I give another illustration of what Aristotle means by his notion of regime. We have come to distinguish between legality and legitimacy. Whatever is legal in a given society derives its ultimate legitimation from something which is the source of all laws, ordinary or constitutional, from the legitimating principle. That may be the sovereignty of the people, [or] the divine right of kings. The legitimating principle is not simply justice, for there is a variety of principles of legitimacy. In other words, the legitimating principle is not natural law, for natural law is as such neutral as between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy. Therefore natural law as such cannot be the legitimating principle, say, of democracy. The principle of legitimacy is in each case a specific notion of justice, and this is stated with the greatest clarity in Aristotle when he says: What do you mean by justice? Democratic justice, oligarchic justice, aristocratic justice, and so on; justice democratically understood, and justice oligarchically understood, and justice aristocratically understood, and so on. This means that every political society derives its character from a specific public or political morality, from what it regards as politically defensible: this means from what the preponderant part of society regards as just. A given society may be characterized by extreme permissiveness, but this very permissiveness is in need of being established and defended. This is not in a state of nature. It necessarily has its limits. A permissive society which permits to its members also every thought of nonpermissiveness will soon cease to be permissive, for the simple reason that it will vanish from the face of the earth. Not to see the *polis* or the city in the light of the variety of regimes means not to look at the city as a political man, that is to say, as a man concerned with a specific public morality. This variety of regimes, which is an empirical fact as everyone knows and knew it all the time, gives rise to the question—I mean among unsophisticated people, and some of us have perhaps recovered the unsophistication after a false sophistication—this variety of regimes gives rise to the question: Which is the better, which is the best regime? Therefore this becomes the guiding question of Aristotle's political philosophy: What is the best regime? Of that I will speak immediately, but I assume that there are some points which need explanation.

If I may make this remark, I think this character[istic] of Aristotle is not generally understood, that[9] [he] is [very much more] "realistic"[10] than quite a few other political thinkers. This assertion is up against the fact that there is so much idealism in Aristotle in addition to the realism. But there is a difference between Aristotle's realism and a certain realism which the Machiavellian tradition in modern times is concerned with. This has its ground in the fact that Aristotle looks at political things always in the perspective of political man and not in the perspective of an outside observer, who as it were hands over the results of his observation and his inference[s] from them to the practitioner for his use. One could very roughly say that this is what Machiavelli would do. This is not sufficiently seen. If this is the way in which a citizen or statesman looks at the political objectives, whatever the objectives may be, the present-day political scientist and his intellectual forebears stand here and look at this movement of the citizen or the statesman or the societies toward their objectives, make certain observations, generalize from them, [and] formulate that perhaps in the form of laws which can then be used by the practitioners. Aristotle stands here too; he only looks further in the same direction. One can say that therefore the question of the best regime ceases to be this fantastic thing, entirely ivory tower thing, which it is frequently presented [as]. He is simply thinking

through what every citizen and every statesman somehow implies. He has a view of what is the best order of society here and now, and it is impossible to have such a view without having some view, however undeveloped, of what would be the simply best. Yes, Mr. Seltzer?

Mr. Seltzer: I'm not quite sure I understand the connection between Aristotle's view that philosophy is inaccessible to the majority and his view that philosophy or science should not be used for the sake of human power.

LS: I will take this up coherently. One would have to take up his distinction between theoretical and practical. That one should use practical philosophy, that is to say ethics, politics and so on, for practical purposes goes without saying. The question concerns the use of theoretical science for practical purposes. I will say a few words about this later.

Student: I don't understand why the tenet of the fundamental harmony between the demos and philosophy has the necessary consequence of a technological society.

LS: But you would admit that you must have one of these two consequences, as I stated them, either universal enlightenment or technology? Would you admit that? Would you admit that one of the two is a necessary consequence?

Student: Why are they exclusive alternatives?

LS: They are not exclusive alternatives. The modern development shows that both happen. That they are in a way belonging together we see from the fact that in present-day liberal democracy you have a hidden conflict between democracy and technocracy. Do you know the fact of this conflict, that many important decisions are in fact made by specialists, nuclear scientists or whatever it may be? President Eisenhower made some remark about this fear, I believe it was in his farewell speech, about this danger.[x] At any rate, you find that in the work of Lasswell[xi] this plays a very great role, technocracy versus democracy. Let me try to restate it. The tension between the philosophers and the *demos*: the philosophers have this end and the nonphilosophers have that end. But what[11] if philosophy ultimately serves these ends? That would be a harmony, wouldn't it? This does not necessarily mean the nonscientists rule; it could very well be that these philosophers or scientists rule, but they rule in a way that the people get what they want. In Bacon's *New Atlantis* there is some sketch of that. That is one way. And the other way is that the people themselves, so to speak, become philosophers by learning in schools, colleges, universities—everyone. It is conceivable that only the one would take place or

---

[x] "Farewell Radio and Television Address to the American People," January 17, 1961. https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/all_about_ike/speeches/farewell_address.pdf. Eisenhower warned that "in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific–technological elite."

[xi] See., e.g., Harold Lasswell, "The Political Science of Science," presidential address to the American Political Science Association, 1956, *APSR* 50 (1956): 961-79; *The Future of Political Science* (1962).

the other, but one of the two, that we can say; and in fact I would say that both happened in modern times—incompletely, naturally.

Student: So far as this tension existed between the philosophers and the *demos*, that means that the *demos* can't become philosophers, at least in Aristotle's view, and the philosophers would not want to become the *demos*. That means that in constructing a state which is to be your model, justice takes it bearing from the philosophers' point of view and not from any other point of view. Is that right?

LS: Yes and no. In a way, you are right. But in order to state it precisely you would have to say that the superiority of the philosophers follows from a general principle, namely, unequal things to unequal people. There are inequalities which give in themselves no possible right to political superiority: for example, mere beauty. I mean, there are cases in which senators are elected because they look better than their opponents, but that is exceptional. Ordinarily we are concerned with other qualities than beauty. Intelligence, and especially political intelligence, is a very relevant inequality; also certain forms of virtue. The argument could be put in the form of a syllogism: The best men should rule; but the philosophers are the best men; hence, philosophers should rule. You can question all the points, especially the minor, that the philosophers are the best men, and you would have to go into that. But Aristotle thought that. Aristotle, by the way, did not think [about] it in that simple way, as you know. Plato discusses it in this form in the *Republic*. Aristotle is sure that the philosopher should not rule.

Student: But if that is the case, then why take it as the standard?

LS: I stated that. There is an intermediate stratum: people, while not philosophers but are susceptible to philosophy, who can listen to philosophers. This I would say is the philosophic concept of the gentleman. One thing which one cannot emphasize too strongly is the difference between the natural hierarchy, and which Aristotle regarded as most important, and the factual social hierarchy. That is the problem. That is in a way the deepest political problem, that the factual social hierarchy does not agree with the natural hierarchy. No one in his senses would object to being ruled by people who are manifestly wiser and more virtuous than he is. Many people do it factually, but on bad grounds. But the difficulty is that the social hierarchy is unfortunately very rarely the natural hierarchy. No one has expressed this more beautifully than Plato in the so-called noble lie of the *Republic*, where he says [12]in effect that if a society is stable it is based on a general belief that the people who are in control, regardless whether by heredity or by election, deserve to run the country.[xii] If there is a general opinion that they do not deserve to run it, that they are fools and crooks, then the whole society falls to pieces. In fairness to Aristotle one must say that he always thinks of a natural hierarchy. You can make this objection to him; you can say: In fact you never get the natural hierarchy, you always get some more or less adequate imitation of it. Since this is not an hierarchy which is truly respectable, why not simply start from a shrewd but fair egalitarian premise, because the natural inequality has very little to do with the social inequality? That you can say was the strong point of modern democratic theory, if wisely understood; [it] did not say that all men are

[xii] *Republic* 414b-415d.

equal in the politically most important respects but said: Let us take this as the premise, and we will get on the whole more satisfactory results than if we start from the alternative premise which, [13]even if true theoretically, is practically of little value.

Student: Doesn't this come back to the question we dealt with earlier, that is, if the *demos* does have an awareness of who the philosophers are and does consent to be ruled by these people because, as you said, anyone in his right mind would not oppose being ruled by them, doesn't that imply that if the *demos* doesn't acknowledge this, if they're not aware of something outside themselves but they must of necessity be aware of something within themselves which might qualify them for something . . .

LS: That is a question. Surely they must have it in themselves. Take this scene at the end of Plato's *Phaedo*, this simple slave, [14]the executioner of Athens, who takes care of Socrates's execution—you know, the poisoner—what he says about Socrates.[xiii] This was surely a man who had sensed what Socrates was, though he could not have followed the speeches exchanged by Socrates and his fellows. But the point is, is the fact that awareness of the principle is open to everyone, can you build anything on that? Are there not also counterforces in each man which obstruct this deference so that in addition to persuasion, coercion would be needed? There is a place in Plato's *Republic* where he discusses this very question with utmost philosophic radicalism.[xiv] Some people, and quite a few people, as a matter of fact, regardless of social standing would suppress any inkling in favor of their self-assertion, their envy, or what have you.

Student: You will agree that the differentiation between the *demos*, in that situation in which the *demos* is aware of what the leadership qualities are and thereby accepts the philosophers as leaders, does blur the distinction between the philosophers and the *demos*.

LS: The question is complicated. There is this and that. But the question is simply that where both possibilities are theoretically[15] [present], which has the greater probability, so that we can base our overall preference on that.

Student: I think my question follows on that. What really is common between the good of the philosophers and the good of the other people?

LS: Well, now you mean a man like Aristotle? You know, and I don't have to tell you, that he must eat, he must sleep, and if he is not reasonably well off by inheritance, he must earn his money. That is not unimportant. And the last problem would be that he is killable. Very important. Look at Socrates, and Socrates is not the only case of that. So

---

[xiii] *Phaedo* 116c-d: "Socrates, I shall not find fault with you, as I do with others, for being angry and cursing me, when at the behest of the authorities, I tell them to drink the poison. No, I have found you in all this time in every way the noblest and gentlest and best man who has ever come here, and now I know your anger is directed at others, not against me, for you know who are to blame."

[xiv] Strauss may be referring to *Republic* 487b1-489e2. Cf. 497d8-498d4, 499d8-500a8, and 501c4-502a4.

there is something in common. And there is also in common this general noble human propensity: love of virtue, as the ancients called it, which acts in most men to some degree but in very different degrees of cultivation.

Student: But the founders of states or leaders of states or prophets cultivate the virtues and yet are not philosophers.

LS: What is in Aristotle's view the specific contribution of political philosophy which statesmanship as such cannot give? I think Aristotle would say that the greatest possible clarity about the aims, objectives, ends of political life cannot be obtained from the statesman. The statesman invariably works within a limited framework, this or that, and cannot devote sufficient attention to the questions transcending this framework. I think one can show this very beautifully. I remember a remarkable statement of Churchill in his *Marlborough*, when he discusses the ultimate principles which should guide a statesman.[xv] It is a very impressive formulation, but I think no political philosopher would have been satisfied with that. It is massive [and] on the whole true, but is it complete? Is it true in all cases? That would be the question. That ordinarily doesn't arise in political life, but it is a question which one cannot neglect because some people, at least, are very anxious to have clarity.

Student: It seems, though, on the argument that Aristotle presents, what actually becomes of a situation is that [it is] the philosopher who is capable of full existence or the highest good, and that therefore justice takes its meaning from this position that the philosopher reaches. In other words, he attributes justice, so to speak, from his position in the world, whereas the man does not attain this position attributes justice insofar as he is a merchant or whatever he is.

LS: That, however, doesn't lead to a relativism. It leads to the question of competence.

Same student: Doesn't it lead to the question of the validity of the philosopher's end?

LS: Surely. If this is merely the expression of an irrational urge for contemplation, or for clarity or whatever you call it, then of course, why should it be any more respectable than stamp collecting or tightrope dancing or any other rare activity? You can say that in the *Politics* or in the *Ethics*—they are inseparable—a case is made for the supremacy of the theoretical life. If the philosopher says that the philosophic life is the highest, and you say that is a professional bias, that is similar to the view that our opinion that man has a special dignity is due only to a human bias, a human pride. And the dogs or lions say exactly the same thing. But dogs and lions don't speak English; they cannot be proud,

---

[xv] Strauss may be referring the following passage: "It is not given to princes, statesmen, and captains to pierce the mysteries of the future, and even the most penetrating gaze reaches only conclusions which, however seemingly vindicated at a given moment, are inexorably effaced by time. One rule of conduct alone survives as a guide to men in their wanderings: fidelity to covenants, the honour of soldiers, and the hatred of causing human woe." Winston S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, 1933-38), book 2, 996. (Book 2 consists of volumes 3 and 4 of the original work.)

soundly or unsoundly. Man can be unsoundly proud only because he has a reason for being soundly proud. That is the trouble. Whether that applies in the same way to philosophers is another matter. I think the true philosophers would say that the nonphilosopher always takes for granted certain things dogmatically, things of the utmost importance. The philosophers begin there. And that is a kind of . . . of thoughtfulness, and there is at least a presumption that this is an excellence more connected with man as man than stamp collecting or tightrope dancing.

Student: What I'm getting at is this. I'm not sure it follows, even if we grant there is an hierarchy in the virtues, that the state managed by such a man is the best for all the men in that state.

LS: Aristotle would entirely agree on this point. But Aristotle would still say that a *polis* which is not in a way open to philosophy and its humanizing influence is a very defective *polis*. That he would say.[xvi]

We turn now to the question which is in a way the guiding question of Aristotle's *Politics*, the question of the best regime. Now Aristotle gives two answers to this question, and the first is very strange in our days (it was not always regarded as strange), namely, the best or most divine is kingship. And he means by that an absolute monarchy. What are the reasons which Aristotle gives? For example, he refers to the following consideration. Kingship[16]—that is, if it is true kingship, of course—resembles paternity, paternal rule: [a king is] the father of his people. And paternal rule is essentially rule in the interest of the ruled, whereas in all other cases of rule it is at least open to the interest of the ruler. Furthermore, in a republican order, when you have the rule of more than one, you necessarily need artifices of some kind, some conventions. For example, there are five leaders: he will do that, he will do that, and he will do that. This distinction is to some extent always artificial and arbitrary. But I will read to you the clearest passage on the subject, which occurs in the *Eudemian Ethics*. You see there are three *Ethics* which have come down as Aristotelian: that which we more precisely call the *Nicomachean Ethics* for some reason or other; and then there is one which is called the *Eudemian Ethics*. Why they have these names is not quite clear. And then there is a third which is called the *Magna Moralia*, the *Great Ethics*, which is regarded by many people as spurious. But what I am quoting is from the *Eudemian Ethics*, book 7, 1242b. When he was speaking here of the best republican regime he says: "There is present here a ruling element and a ruled, not the naturally ruling, or the kingly one, but one that rules in turn." In a republic men rule only for some time, i.e., rule in turn. "In turn" means all the special legal arrangements, how long, and so on. "And not for the purpose of conferring benefits, as God rules, but in order that he may have an equal share of the benefits and of the burdens."[xvii] That is the clearest formulation of this point in Aristotle.

That however is of no great importance because in Aristotle, as he makes clear in the *Politics*, kingly rule is feasible only at the beginning of society, the early times, [with] the original founders who must have been men by far superior to their fellows. In more

[xvi] The tape was changed at this point.
[xvii] Presumably Strauss's translation.

developed societies there can only be republican forms. The clearest proof of that is that in the last two books of the *Politics*, books 7 and 8, where Aristotle gives a sketch of what he regards as the best regime. He has clearly a republican government, something which we might call aristocracy, or we can also call it polity—I hope you remember that name: the good kind of democracy; in other words, [one with] a considerable property qualification. Now the characteristic of this best regime as described in books 7 and 8: it is a *polis* without a *demos*. That is Aristotle's fantastic solution to the political problem. If you have a *demos*, you must give the *demos* some rights, that is clear. Otherwise you have a constant turmoil. Therefore the most elegant solution, as a mathematician would say, would be a *polis* without a *demos*, the citizen body consisting only of gentlemen and the others are either resident aliens or slaves.

Now according to Aristotle's view, slavery is just only if the slaves deserve to be slaves, if the slaves are by nature slaves. A man is a slave by nature if he is incapable to take care of himself, so that no harm is done to him. On the contrary, benefit is conferred upon him if someone else takes care of him. I like to illustrate this as follows. Aristotle also says that a natural slave is not much better than a brute, but he is better insofar as he can understand human language to a higher degree than any brute can. Now I use this example: if you take a particularly stupid fellow—no, that's not a good example from his point of view, but in other respects it's very good. That is in Shakespeare's *Tempest*: Caliban is in a way a natural slave, but not because of particular stupidity but because of a combination of stupidity and viciousness. But Aristotle does not think so much of Caliban, I believe, but of another kind. I illustrate it for my own benefit as follows, and I hope it will also be of some benefit to you. You have a very stupid fellow, but he is very strong. He can carry large logs. You tell him: Bring five logs; two, three, four, five. He is just capable [enough] not to forget that until he is going to do it. Now this is a clear case of a man who is clearly better off if he is in the—I have met such a man once, and I had many conversations with him because I wanted to understand Aristotle. He of course is not a free man in this country; he is in an institution for rather feebleminded people and he is lent to people who use him for a few hours doing work. He can wash walls and some other things. And he[17] must not be given any alcohol, because he is completely unable to resist that; once he is given it, he falls asleep and cannot even wash walls. These kind of people exist. Only such or similar people can be justly enslaved, according to Aristotle.

But in his best regime as described in books 7 and 8, he says one must hold out to the slave the promise of emancipation; and he means this not as a lie, because that would soon be found out, but he means they should be emancipated. Now this can mean three things. In the first place, after a number of generations you have these freedmen around, and you will have in fact a *demos*. They are denied all citizen rights, but they are around, and in emergencies and wards they will also be needed from time to time. Then you are up against the problem of the *demos* claiming rights. But the other point I believe is equally interesting: that Aristotle seems here to admit that natural slavery as described by him in the first book is of no use. These people, these almost feebleminded fellows, surely they are better off if some nice master takes care of them, but they are very little good to the master. So if you want to have slaves, you will have to transgress the strict

prohibition against enslaving people who are not by nature slaves. In other words, you have to commit an act of injustice. That I believe Aristotle said with his eyes open. He stated the problem of justice with utmost clarity, and by implication raised the question: Is justice, strictly understood, feasible in political society? Thomas Aquinas, incidentally, solved this question of slavery in a way which is not open to this objection but is open to another objection, namely, that the conventional slavery, the enslaving of men who are not by nature slaves, is a benefit of international law, as we would say today. People taken prisoners in war who could have been killed by the victors are spared under the condition that they become slaves, so that this slavery is a benefit; and therefore this kind of slavery is just.[xviii] I believe Aristotle would say it is not just, because strictly speaking you have no right to kill people who have surrendered. Even the best regime is of questionable justice. In other words, a perfect solution of the political problem is impossible. The [solution of the] political problem is a perfectly just society which is in accordance with natural inequality, in Aristotle's view, and such a society is never quite possible. We confront this again with the modern theme: the perfectly just society which is in accordance with postulated equality—not with natural equality but with postulated equality—and which requires technology and universal enlightenment.

I would like to state the basic difficulty of Aristotle's doctrine as follows, because this difficulty which I just pointed out could be met by Aristotle theoretically by saying: Well, a perfectly just society is not possible, [so] then by committing the least atrocious injustice we have the greatest possible approximation to a just society. More cannot be expected. But there is another difficulty for which there is really no solution on the basis of Aristotle himself, in his own work; in other words, a truly immanent difficulty of Aristotle's political teaching.[xix] The ordinary criticism of Aristotle always starts from premises which Aristotle questions, and therefore they are not truly convincing. But a truly convincing criticism would start from principles granted by Aristotle. Now this difficulty concerns what we now call technology. Aristotle discusses in the second book of the *Politics*—I will take up this passage later—the following question: Should invention be encouraged? The general tenor of Aristotle's answer is no, or at least a doubt, on the following grounds. If I may again use a modern term, technological change leads to social change. Social change leads to change of laws, and this eventually leads to change of regimes. Incidentally, I believe that this is a blind spot of present-day conservatism: it simply means that a dynamic society, as it is now called, is by definition not conservative. Society dedicated to change, to growth, economic and otherwise, is by definition not conservative. That point is not brought out clearly in any conservative doctrine which I have seen. Aristotle is in this respect absolutely consistent. He is in the present-day sense of the word conservative, and therefore he is also opposed to technological change.

Up to this [point], his doctrine is perfectly clear. Yet he must make one exception: inventions regarding war must be encouraged. If you want to read that, [see] 1331a1 to

---

[xviii] See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the* "Politics," book 1, lesson 4, numbers 75 and 79. This commentary was probably written between 1270 and 1272.

[xix] Concerning the discussion which follows, see Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1958), 298-99.

14. Why? Too much is at stake. [It is] the famous story in every war, where inventions which in other respects are very undesirable must be encouraged for the sake of defense, or even survival. But what does this mean? The virtuous society, the society dedicated to human excellence, would control technological change from the point of view of human excellence. It would not give the arts, the manual as well as the fine arts, perfect freedom to subvert moral virtue, whereas a society which is not dedicated to excellence—call it for simplicity's sake a vicious society—will of course not impose any such limitations. Now if the virtuous society must encourage inventions regarding war, this means that the wicked impose their law on the good. The good society must go in for all kinds of military inventions, because otherwise it would be defeated by the wicked. We take only one step and say that the good cannot be simply good because of the many wicked. In other words, you make only one slight step and you have gone over from Aristotle to Machiavelli. That is the true point of entry of Machiavelli, since there is a later modern criticism from Hobbes, and Aristotle has no defense against that. If one tries to understand how Aristotle would have argued against this point, two arguments would occur.

Student: Would you repeat that point, please?

LS: Inventions must be supervised and must never be permitted to get out of hand, therefore they must be fundamentally discouraged. But inventions regarding war must be encouraged for the obvious reason, and that means ultimately because the wicked, who develop a fantastic capacity, would defeat the good, which must be prevented. And that is the Machiavellian principle: Goodness is not possible because there are so many wicked. The wicked impose their law on the good. Now Aristotle I believe would argue as follows, and he would say first that technological change which is really terrific and gives society its character is the change due to the use [of science] for technology[18]. The scientist must abstain from becoming the servant of the government. This subject has been discussed in one piece of literature, Plutarch's biography of Marcellus.[xx] Marcellus was a Roman general who conquered Syracuse, and the most important citizen of Syracuse at that time was one of the greatest scientists of all times, Archimedes. Archimedes, as a good patriotic citizen, helped the city in building a machine for holding off the enemy. Now in this connection, Archimedes's whole posture toward the technological use of his science is discussed in a very impressive way, and I think you should read it.

The second reply of Aristotle would be this. Aristotle thought that there are in long time—I would say thousands of years, but not in ten thousands of years, not five thousands of years—periodic natural catastrophes: cataclysms, floods, and so on. Hence there would be an end of any development of that kind. There could not be an excessive development of human art, and particularly of military technology, because of these periodic natural catastrophes. And from this point of view, very strangely, these natural catastrophes appear as an act of beneficence of nature. One can also put it this way. When men had become completely evil and dissolute in every respect, then they are destroyed,

[xx] See Plutarch, *Lives*, available through a number of internet sources.

like the generation of the flood in the Bible you know, but in Aristotle's schema that would be a natural periodic occurrence.

These reasonings are manifestly not sufficient. We can state the defect of Aristotle's doctrine in this respect as follows. Man's power over nature has proved to be much greater than Aristotle believed, but this means also the other way around that nature's beneficence to man is smaller than Aristotle thought. This is I believe the core of the modern view expressed in the phrase "conquest of nature," which implies that nature is an enemy to be conquered. In other words, the modern view is not entirely baseless. If you speak of the great triumphs of modern natural science, triumphs which Aristotle never dreamed of, I would say that is only part, although the most important part, of this comprehensive change, namely, that man's power over nature is greater and correspondingly nature's beneficence to man is smaller than Aristotle thought. Indeed, one can also say, if one prefers that, that Aristotle did not foresee modern natural science (in any significant way?)[xxi] and that this modern natural science created the difficulty. But if we limit ourselves then entirely to natural science, we must also say that this victory of modern natural science does not itself decide the issue between the modern and the Aristotelian point of view, because modern natural science and its implication, i.e., a social science or psychology modelled on modern natural science, is completely silent and of no help whatever regarding the human questions. And while Aristotle's doctrine as he developed it is surely in need of certain corrections, the corrective is not what we have now in the form of natural and social science. It would have to be something much more comprehensive.

This is what I wanted to say on the subject of Aristotle's doctrine of the best regime. I will have to take up this question in a systematic way, [the question] of the distinction between theory and practice, or more generally stated in the form of my original scheme, when I said that Aristotle's political philosophy is the original form of political philosophy or political science. That can be contested on the ground that there was quite a development of political philosophy or political science prior to Aristotle. What is the peculiarity of Aristotle's doctrine compared to that of Plato and other earlier Greek thinkers? I will take up this in the rest of the course, to get a more precise notion of the character of Aristotle's political philosophy. Yes?

Student: Would you repeat the first of Aristotle's two problems?

LS: That the scientist, the theoretical man, must simply abstain, refuse to become the servant of any exploitation, any technological exploitation. By the way, there are some physicists today who take this view, although they no longer have the Aristotelian view of *theoria*, contemplation. Yes?

Student: I was interested in your remarks about de Jouvenel. As I understand it, there are two systems, modern liberal democracy and fascism, which both make universal claims that they have solved the political problem for all times in all places.

[xxi] This parenthetical remark appears in the original transcript, evidently a guess by the transcriber as to what Strauss said.

LS: No, that is not what they would say, but they are today at any rate the alternatives.

Student: They are the alternatives. Jouvenel however does not see it this way so much, perhaps.

LS: He knows that, of course, but he limits himself to this analysis, to one phenomenon, and that is the strengthening of the monarchic executive, you know, going much beyond what was usual during the nineteenth century and before the First World War.

Student: For example, doesn't de Gaulle, and perhaps in this country Kennedy—the desire for a strong leader, that Kennedy doesn't have this power in fact which is not given him by the Congress—

LS: You mentioned now de Gaulle. Is there not such a fact as what Khrushchev called a certain aspect of personality?[xxii] That could exist also in noncommunist countries. I do not say this in criticism of your point, but this is a crucial consideration, is it not?

Student: What does he have in mind, that you have the people on the one hand—

LS: No, simply that according to the general liberal democratic view, there would be control in the hands of the assembly, not in individuals. The United States Constitution[19] [separates] the legislative from the executive, and that was the meaning of the emphasis adopted. The center of power is in the people—sovereignty, the center of power. In other words, the republican notion which has grown up in the West and was thought to be the goal of development in all countries, republican means that no men are . . .

Student: [. . .]

LS: He regards this as a political thing in contradistinction to a social thing. When you make this distinction today, you imply that the deeper things are the social things . . . You find it in communist countries as well as in Western countries. It was only this very simple question whether the emergence in many countries of a monarchic executive, how this would—

Student: I was asking about a more satisfactory, a more fundamental understanding of the political situation than underlies some of the—

LS: From all I have heard, this oligarchic problem plays a considerable role in South America. I think from all I have read that that seems to be the case. But that would only show that the issue democracy versus communism is not the only issue, political issue in our time, but it is still the overriding issue because these countries depend absolutely on the preservation of the noncommunist democracies. And it is even a question whether the democracies can save them in the long run.

[xxii] For Khrushchev on personality cult, see session 9, n. x.

Student: Isn't it misleading to say that natural science has very little to say about the human questions, in the sense that the Aristotelian view of nature seems to have been very important for the type of political system that was developed by Plato and Aristotle? I mean, if we have to derive the possibility of a certain military measure on a natural hierarchy, are we led to consider the problems of political life in an entirely different frame of reference which might necessarily lead to different regimes?

LS: In other words, you say that assuming modern natural science has refuted Aristotelian natural science, then the whole Aristotelian doctrine—well, let us not be pedantic about it—then the whole thing breaks down. Sure, that is a perfectly defensible position. But then you come up against other questions, because then you must face the fact that in the more recent development of both the natural sciences and the reflection regarding natural science it is understood that value judgments, as they are called, have no rational basis. That is academically or theoretically the most urgent question of the day. So the people who are aware of that and do not just whistle in the dark are then compelled to say: Then, all right, we must have two kinds of science: the natural sciences, which are wholly nonteleological, wholly value-free; and then science of man, which necessarily looks at man from the point of view of goodness or badness, however you call it. That I think is for the time being the best that a sober man could propose, but it is in the long run not sufficient because we need some unity.

Student: Yes, what I had in mind even more specifically is that can't we say that the solution of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is the best we can do under the circumstances . . .

LS: But the trouble is that when this was stated in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, at this time it was taken for granted that reason, say, reason fundamentally informed by modern natural science, gives us a clear guide as to good and bad or right and wrong. Today, as you must have heard (you have gone through college and so you must know that) it is understood that, say, the preamble of the Declaration of Independence and similar statements, if they are not described as glittering generalities altogether, are said to be one kind of evaluation which a man can accept or which a society can accept, but with no greater right than the so-called values of fascism, communism, or what have you. You know that is the predominant view.

And the way in which this was established in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, I believe, is in fact not valid. I would state my reasons differently from the ordinary positivistic reasons, but there is a real difficulty. [20]If someone would say: Take as a specific example freedom of speech as it is now recognized in all liberal democracies. It was not recognized before, not even in the most liberal societies of the past, say, in Athens. That is I think a great error, to believe that there was there a First Amendment [in Athens]. Nothing of the kind. There was a very easygoing practice, but never a legal basis. The government could always assert its right, and the case of Socrates is a famous example. Legally, the city of Athens could demand from the citizen that he believe that the gods worshiped by the city of Athens existed. Socrates never questioned that right, and it was merely a question of fact: Did Socrates commit that crime or did he not?

Today we have this right and it would be extremely hard for any one of us to live without it, but what is the status of that right? The traditional view stemming from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that it was a natural right belonging to man as man, most clearly stated in this form, I think, by Spinoza in the last chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.[xxiii] There it was stated only as a natural right without any expediential reason. Today of course the positivistic people would not think of natural right, but in fact they treat it as an absolute in practice. I believe the sober reason is partly presented by Milton in the *Areopagitica* and can be stated as follows. Any limitation of the freedom of speech means entrusting great power to a censor or to a body of censors. The chances that the censor or body of censors are stupid people is greater than that they are wise people; therefore it is a sound rule of thumb not to have censors, i.e., to have freedom of speech, as Spinoza said. But a rule of thumb is not an absolute right. The extremely curious thing is that people who call themselves liberal, who reject all absolutes in the name of liberalism, treat in fact certain rights, which are on the whole beneficial, as absolutes, which they surely are not from any point of view: from the liberal point of view, because there are no absolutes; from the nonliberal point of view because even there the fact is they[xxiv] are not absolutes. That, I think, is the difficulty.

What you aim at is perfectly sensible. We must see the manifest blessings true of liberal democracy. We must speak about it and see how they are related ultimately to the nature of man. We must see this with our own efforts, because the traditional doctrines do not do this and this is also recognized by my worst enemies, if I may say so, meaning the positivists. You know what they say about the classical doctrine of democracy, that it has been refuted by the observation that the citizen body of liberal democracy does not consist of purely wise and virtuous men. I've heard that, as if anyone ever doubted it. But the so-called classic doctrine, as presented by John Stuart Mill and by some others, is not . . . And yet what we do today is basking in the sun of a glorious tradition, on the whole, the salutary effects of liberal democracy, but the theoretical foundations, we have no such doctrine. That is doubtless true. But I believe that in order to acquire clarity we must face the fundamental issue which does not come out clearly in a discussion of the principles of communism or fascism, which are two poor doctrines. But we must take the doctrines of the highest level of theoretical sophistication, and I know of no more useful one than Aristotle, and learn from Aristotle where we differ. I don't mean just read what he says about democracy and say "Terrible man!" and get indignant, but we ought to learn something . . . in other words, the certainty that universal enlightenment is impossible, because he didn't believe in the possibility of universal education. Then of course we can say we are a much richer society, as a matter of fact an affluent society, as someone has called it;[xxv] therefore universal education is possible which was financially not possible in Aristotle's time. All right, the argument is perfectly sound up to this point. But then we would have to take a look at our education. Does it live up to severe

---

[xxiii] Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chapter 20: "It is shown that, in a Free Republic, each is permitted both to think what he wants and to say what he thinks." For an English translation, see *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise,* trans. Martin D. Yaffe (The Focus Philosophical Library, 2004), 229-37.

[xxiv] A handwritten note appears in the margin of the original transcript here: "(there?)

[xxv] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958).

standards of education, i.e., the formation of character plus stiff training of minds, but not self-congratulation? I think, as was said of old, that the distinction between the flatterer of the prince and the friend of the prince, that is also true of the *demos*: there are flatterers of the *demos* and there are friends of the *demos*. And I would not wish to be a flatterer. I think there is a help to be gained from these old people who were not even friends of the *demos*.

Student: I want to talk about de Jouvenel for a moment. Now I don't believe, as he says, that the political element is of itself superficial. In his book, *Sovereignty*, he seems to say that the whole of modern politics, Russian as well as American, English, and French, stems from the rejection of the sovereignty of God, and in its place is put the sovereignty of man. In his chapter on justice he teaches that justice is the larger concern, as in the ancients. He quotes from Saint Thomas and even from Aristotle, that wherein it lay in the mind of man, that is, it represented a relation between men and things, it today represents the configuration itself dominant.[xxvi]

LS: I have read the book, but I do not remember the section where he says this. I have read only this article here, and was interested in it as a piece of present-day political analysis. He sent it to me. It must have been published within the last year. And I did this to show how this same phenomenon has been analyzed by Aristotle. I know that he is aware of the fundamental conflict between liberal democracy and communism, but in this analysis that doesn't come out.

Student: But in the book, they're all degenerate forms.

LS: Well, I must say I was not impressed by the book as a piece of theoretical analysis . . . I only happened to read that, and I thought it was a good example for illustrating what Aristotle means.

---

[1] Deleted "just"
[2] Deleted "he differs"
[3] Deleted "what"
[4] Deleted "it was"
[5] Deleted "on the one hand"
[6] Deleted "is"
[7] Deleted "he"
[8] Deleted "he"
[9] Deleted "Aristotle"
[10] Moved "very much more"
[11] Deleted "about"
[12] Deleted "that"
[13] Deleted "is also"
[14] Deleted "of"
[15] Deleted "there"
[16] Deleted "reminds"
[17] Deleted "only"
[18] Moved "of science"

[xxvi] "It" in the last sentence would seem to refer to justice.

[19] Deleted “disperses”
[20] Deleted “But what I said before in a very general way”

Session 13: 15 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: Now I remind you of the starting point of this course. We started from the present-day problem which within the academic sphere is that of the possibility of a value-free social science; or differently stated, the premise is generally accepted that there is a fundamental distinction between facts and values. It is not sufficient to examine this proposition on its own terms. One has to enlarge it, and then one comes up against the question of common sense and science—common sense in distinction from science. It appears that common sense is primary. Scientific understanding of political matters is derivative from commonsense understanding. Once this clear, one realizes it is necessary to have a coherent and comprehensive account of the commonsense understanding of political things. This is the primary reason why we turn to Aristotle's *Politics*. There is some reason for asserting that Aristotle's *Politics* is [1]the classic presentation of political things as they appear in the horizon of common sense of the citizen or statesman. We can say that Aristotle is the originator of political philosophy or political science because he marks the transition from the ordinary commonsense understanding of the citizen or statesman to philosophic presentation of politics. Yet one may raise this objection, the objection especially of historicism: there is not the common sense of man as man, but always a specific common sense. We shall have to take up this point later.

For the time being, I would like to mention a more superficial objection to the assertion I made regarding Aristotle. It is not Aristotle but Socrates who is the founder of political science, according to a saying of Cicero. Today many people would say that political philosophy existed even prior to Socrates. I believe in every textbook, mention is made at least of the sophists as political philosophers prior to Socrates, and some people would add the orators, the historians, the poets, and so on. Now in order to reach some clarity about this point, which you soon will see is of more than antiquarian importance, we must make a distinction between political philosophy and political thought in general. Political thought is coeval with political life, because man is a being who cannot live without thinking, but political philosophy emerged within a particular political life and also at a knowable date in that part of the past, we can say, of which we have records. Political philosophy, in a word, is a kind of political thought, the political thought which is philosophic. But what does this mean? Political philosophy is preceded by philosophy. There were philosophers prior to the first political philosopher. Whoever the first political philosopher may have been (we will take up this question somewhat later), there were philosophers prior to him.

Now Aristotle calls the first philosophers physiologists, which means men who discourse on nature, and [he] distinguishes them from men whom he calls theologists—I deliberately do not say theologians, because this is somewhat different—or people who

[i] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 13-29. Strauss also makes use in this session of his introduction in *History of Political Philosophy*, edited by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 1st ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1962), 1-6 and *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 81-93.

discourse on the gods. So we will provisionally say that political philosophy, in contradistinction to political thought in general, deals with political things in the light of "nature." But what does that mean? In order to get a first inkling of what this means, let us read the classical answer to the question, what is nature, and also the most compendious answer, and that we find in the fifth book[ii] of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, chapter 4. Mr. Gelblum, you are willing to read that to the rest of the class? Could you come here so that you can more easily be heard?

Reader:

> 'Nature' means (1) the genesis of growing things—the meaning which would be suggested if one were to pronounce the y in *physis* long. (2) That immanent part of a growing thing, from which its growth first proceeds. (3) The source from which the primary movement in each natural object is present in it in virtue of its own essence. Those things are said to grow which derive increase from something else by contact and either by organic unity, or by organic adhesion as in the case of embryos. Organic unity differs from contact; for in the later case there need not be anything besides the contact, but in organic unities there is something identical in both parts, which makes them grow together instead of merely touching, and be one in respect of continuity and quantity, though not of quality. (4) 'Nature' means the primary material of which any natural object consists or out of which it is made, which is relatively unshaped and cannot be changed from its own potency, as e.g. bronze is said to be the nature of a statue and of bronze utensils, and wood the nature of wooden things; and so in all other cases; for when a product is made out of these materials, the first matter is preserved throughout. For it is in this way that people call the elements of natural objects also their nature, some naming fire, others earth, others air, others water, others something else of the sort, and some naming more than one of these, and others all of them. (5) 'Nature' means the essence of natural objects, as with those who say the nature is the primary mode of composition, or as Empedocles says:
>
> > 'Nothing that is has a nature,
> > But only mixing and parting of the mixed,
> > And nature is but a name given them by men.'
>
> Hence as regards the things that are or come to be by nature, though that from which they naturally come to be or are is already present, we say they have not their nature yet, unless they have their form or shape. That which comprises both of these exists by nature, e.g. the animals and their parts; and not only is the first matter nature (and this in two senses, either the first, counting from the thing, or the first in general; e.g. in the case of works in bronze, bronze is first with reference to them, but in general perhaps water is first, if all things that can be melted are water), but also the form or essence, which is the end of the process of becoming. (6) By an extension of meaning from this sense of 'nature' every essence in general has come to be called a 'nature,' because the nature of a thing is one kind of essence.

[ii] Sometimes referred to with Greek symbol for "delta."

> From what has been said, then, it is plain that nature in the primary and strict sense is the essence of things which have in themselves, as such, a source of movement; for the matter is called the nature because it is qualified to receive this, and processes of becoming and growing are called nature because they are movements proceeding from this. And nature in this sense is the source of the movement of natural objects, being present in them somehow, either potentially or in complete reality.[iii]

LS: Now may I address this question to the class: What then is nature? Do you recognize anything you have ever heard in present-day parlance about nature? Do you find anything of this kind in what Aristotle says? What do we understand today colloquially, or perhaps more than colloquially, when we speak of nature? Yes?

Student: That which is not manmade.

LS: Is this provided for by Aristotle? It is provided for because he speaks, if I use the translation, of natural objects. [But] closer to the Greek: the things which are by nature, implying that there are things which are not by nature; in other words, that which is not manmade. What about numbers: 5, 11, and so on?

Student: He would regard them as manmade, or as concepts of mind.

LS: Whereas there are people, for example, the famous mathematician of the last century Dedekind[iv] who said the natural number, the positive integers, were made by God. All other numbers, the fractions, negatives, and so on are made by man. In that case, the numbers would also not be artifacts, the natural numbers, but still would not be by nature, for certain reasons. That is part of the story.

Student: The raw materials, the basic shapes that Aristotle—

LS: Very good. Give an example.

Student: What I had in mind basically was the view of nature that's in Hobbes and Locke. They would talk about the beginning—

LS: But more simply, if you take a shoe: the shoe is manmade, but it couldn't be manmade if there were not something available in the first place: the leather, the wood or whatever it may be. All artifacts presuppose things which are not artifacts, and we call them the raw materials ultimately, but they are natural.

Student: Even if you manufacture something artificially, you consider the model.

[iii] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1014b16-1015a19. See *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

[iv] Richard Dedekind (1831-1916), German mathematician.

LS: We have two meanings of nature which are immediately intelligible: (a) nature as the material; and (b) nature as the model. But still there is one meaning which is not mentioned here at all and which is today I believe the most common one. Yes, Mr. Gelblum?

Mr. Gelblum: We commonly think of nature as that all around us, the trees, animals—

LS: But not merely as consisting of parts—trees, animals—but the whole. That is very important. That is absent here.

Student: When we speak of nature as the nature of things in the present, we could consider its form also, could we not?

LS: For example?

Student: Well, the nature of a building is that it is or can be rectangular.

LS: In other words, we even speak of the nature of artifacts. This is also provided for by some allusions by Aristotle, that by some extension nature is applied to all things, meaning there the form, the completed form. To come back to the point which was made by Mr. Gelblum, the view which I believe is of crucial importance for modern times was clearly stated by Kant: the totality of objects of experience.[v] There are more sophisticated formulations of Kant himself, but I take this as the simplest one, the totality of objects of experience in nature, and therefore it is that whole. But in this modern notion the totality of objects of experience, the distinction between natural things and artifacts has disappeared. A chair is as much a natural thing as a cat from this point of view.

Now this notion of nature as the all-embracing whole exists also in a way in Aristotle, but it is characteristically omitted in this most fundamental statement. Now this view, that nature is as some people would say today the spatiotemporal universe, is underlying a philosophical school which calls itself naturalistic. The characteristic thesis of that modern naturalistic school is "nature is not a term of distinction," i.e., whatever is, is natural. This is surely not the Aristotelian view nor the Greek view altogether, because the distinction between natural things and artifacts was always crucial. But let us proceed step by step. What Aristotle presupposes (and everyone else at that time) is that there are things which are by nature and things which are not by nature, especially the artifacts. Now the chief meaning of nature which Aristotle singles out here is this. Nature in the emphatic sense is the essence of the things which have the origin of motion in themselves. Let us leave it at this abbreviation: self-moving things—animals obviously, but plants too, because the movement which is characteristic of plants, growth, is in them, begins in them. I.e., the stone, the falling stone: that fall is not imposed on the stone from outside, but the stone in itself—every heavy body—falls. This falling is its nature. Related to this meaning, to this fundamental meaning, according to Aristotle is what he said before in the same passage: nature is the essence of the things which are by nature.

---

[v] See Kant, "Preface," *The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786). Also see Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), A216/B263.

This is in a way a bad definition because the thing to be defined occurs in it, but it is nevertheless intelligible. There are things which are by nature and things which are not by nature.

Now what is that which makes the natural things natural things? What is the naturalness of natural things? This is a key question which Aristotle discusses not here but in the second book of the *Physics*. But connected with this meaning is another one which is of special importance to us. We do not say of a thing which is not yet completed [that] it has its nature. [To have its nature] it must have the form and the shape of the being. For example, no one would say an embryo is a human being, to take the extreme case. In a way, we do not even say of a child [that] he is a human being. Common sense. You pass a square and you come a bit late because there were so many beings around you which prevented you going fast, and then you say there were so many men, so many human beings around; but [if] all [of them] were children, you wouldn't say people or human beings, you would say children. And if all [the] people around there had been only women, I believe you would say there were so many women around; I don't believe you would say there were so many human beings. The ladies must excuse me, but I am only trying to interpret Aristotle, not present my own views of that. So if a farmer says to his hand, "Bring me a horse," and he brings him a colt, he will say, "I didn't tell you to bring a colt, I told you to bring a horse." Because a colt is not yet a horse. And by the way, if he would bring him a sick mare, he also would say, "I told you to bring me a horse," because he meant a normal horse, a healthy horse. That is what Aristotle means; that is truly common sense.

Let us try to link this up. The chief meaning of nature according to Aristotle is the form; that is to say, that at which the growth, the coming into being, stops. Nature primarily means, let us say, that growth distinguished from making. We make chairs, we do not make trees. Growth is growth toward a certain state, toward something. And there is necessarily a limit of growth. You must not be misled by the term "growth" as used by John Dewey, for example, where it is implied there is infinite growth, at least in certain respects;[vi] that is wholly alien. All growth has a term, that toward which the thing grows. Now there is a passage in the first book of the *Politics* that is nearer home for us, where this view is clearly expressed: every *polis* is by nature. The *polis* is the end of the other associations, and nature is an end; for how each thing is after the completion of the coming into being, that we say is the nature of the thing regardless of whether it is a human being, or a horse, or a house. In other words, we say that by extension even a house, a building, achieves its nature when the building is completed. In the *Poetics* there is a remark that at this-and-this stage tragedy, which is surely not something natural, acquired its nature, meaning its completion. Only one was truly tragedy; the other things were pretragedy, so to say, but not yet tragedy. The completed growth—the growth had come to an end, and in a way this is a state of rest, but it is not a state of inertia or of inactivity. Look at the grown horse. It is not always asleep. Precisely when the growth has come to an end, the thing can do its specific work; prior to that it cannot do it. Compare the barking of a puppy to the barking of a grown-up dog. That is not yet real

[vi] See, e.g., John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), and *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922).

barking, what the puppy does. But surely in the case of the artifact, the chair for example, one cannot speak strictly speaking of its having acquired its nature when it was completed. That is a merely metaphorical use, because the form of the chair is stamped on the wood from without. The wood does not grow into a chair, it has to be made into a chair.

Now this is an extremely rough sketch of what surely Aristotle meant by nature, and that this is not a merely arbitrary opinion of Aristotle's is indicated by the fact that we can easily reactivate this understanding. Our own language still contains that meaning without any direct influence of Aristotle; coming to think of it, we see that it is this and this we mean. In every language that can be reactivated, that the word, say, for lion means grown-up lion regardless of whether the language has special terms for young lions in various stages of their growth. In some countries where they have lions they have many names for the various stages, but nevertheless that is only a young lion, a lion cub, or whatever we say. Whenever we speak of lion, we mean a grown-up lion. When we mean a chair, we do not mean a broken chair: a chair is a completed chair. However commonsensical this may be, we could say still [that] this full understanding may very well be peculiar to[2] [Aristotle] and not the premise of a classical political philosophy.

I suggest therefore that we turn to the first mention of nature occurring in any Greek text.[vii] That is surely a prephilosophic meaning not tinged by philosophy. Now the text I have in mind occurs in the tenth book of the *Odyssey*, and it is the only mention of nature in the whole Homeric work. Now Odysseus tells there a story. I am sure you know very roughly who Odysseus is. I will say a little bit about that later. He was again shipwrecked, of course, and this time on the island of Circe. His comrades had already gone there and been transformed into pigs by this divine sorceress. Now while he goes there, the god Hermes approaches him, holds his hand, and then speaks:

> "Where are you going, hapless man, along the hills alone, ignorant of the land? Your comrades yonder, at the house of Circe, are penned like swine and kept in fast-closed sties. You come to free them? Nay, I am sure you will return no more, but there, like all the rest, you too will stay. Still, I can keep you free of harm and give you safety. Here, take this potent herb and go to Circe's house; this shall protect your life against the evil day. And I will tell you all the magic arts of Circe: she will prepare for you a potion and cast drugs in your food; but even so, she cannot charm you because the potent herb which I shall give will not permit it. And let me tell you more: when Circe turns against you her long wand, then draw the sharp sword from your thigh and spring upon Circe as it you meant to slay her; she will then cower and bid you to her bed. And do not you refuse the goddess' bed, that so she may release your men and care for you. But bid her swear the blessed ones' great oath that she is not meaning now to plot you a new woe, nor when she has you stripped to leave you feeble and unmanned."

[vii] Concerning the discussion that follows, see Strauss, "Introduction," *History of Political Philosophy*, edited by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 1st ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally 1962), 1-6.

> As he thus spoke the god gave the herb, drawing it from the ground, and pointed out its nature. 'Black at the root it is, like milk its blossom and the gods call it moly. Hard is it for a mortal man to dig; the gods can do everything.'"[viii] [The gods are omnipotent—LS][ix]

This is the passage I mean. Now let us see what we learn from that. The great sufferer Odysseus is compelled to sleep with a goddess out of duty to his comrades. That is not an unimportant part of the action; after all, he is a married man. In other words, he is as loyal to his wife Penelope as she is to him, and that he had to be apparently disloyal is due only to[3] compulsion and [his] duty. He is saved from metamorphosis into a pig by the god Hermes, and that is not surprising because the gods are omnipotent. But in what sense are they omnipotent here? They can easily dig out that herb because, in the first place, they know the herb. They are omnipotent through omniscience. Strictly speaking, they are not omniscient, as is shown in Homer. For example, in the case of Odysseus, "the sun–god whose kine Odysseus slew," and the sun is supposed to be the most all-seeing god. Odysseus slew the kine in daylight, but the sun god didn't know it: someone had to come up to him and tell him what Odysseus did. So the gods are not omniscient literally speaking, they are omnipotent because they know the natures of all things. And here there is an important point: they do not know the natures of all things because they have made these natures. The herb has this nature in itself. The gods know these natures. The natures are of course still less made by man; the natures are not made at all. And here you see that the distinction between nature and art is so radical that art includes even divine art. The natures are not made by men or gods. At a very late stage, we could say, in Greek philosophy this thought has found a very powerful expression in the Platonic dialogue called *Timaeus*, where what we would say the creation of the world by a god is presented. And this god, the demiurge of the universe, makes the world, but by looking at a model, the ideas, which he did not make. Beyond all making, all making by gods or men, there is something: the natural things as natural things. This is the implication from the very beginning. Here we see also clearly in this Homeric example that nature means the character of the thing in the sense of the power of the thing, that which that particular herb is potent to do. Now a very important part of nature, of the concept of nature as analyzed by Aristotle, is then present from the very beginning in Homer and is in this sense prephilosophic or commonsensical.

But one observation is needed at this point. It is present from the very beginning in Greece. Or is this understanding of the thing, this understanding of nature, universal, common to man as man? And I believe we are entitled to say it is not universal. Here lies the relative truth of historicism we spoke of in discussing Collingwood's view. You remember what Collingwood said in criticizing certain [of his] British contemporaries about the concept of the state and the concept of duty, of which they assumed that they are in this form present in all philosophy, and where Collingwood rightly says this is not true. There is no Greek philosophy of the state. There is in a sense no Greek philosophy of duty, because the Greek word which they ordinarily translated by "duty" does not have this meaning. In other words, nature is not known by nature. Nature becomes known only

---

[viii] In original: "with gods all things may be."

[ix] Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. George Herbert Palmer (1894), 10.281-306.

under certain conditions. All Western languages have a word for nature. The Greek word *physis* is translated into Latin by *natura*, which comes from the word *nasci*, to be born, birth, growth; and this word *natura* of course migrated into all the romance languages, and also the Germanic languages belonging to the Western tradition. If we in the West have nature today, it is ultimately due to the influence of Greek.

But what about the Eastern languages? I will first state my own opinion, based on very great ignorance, without any hesitation and then ask our Japanese friend and the other gentleman from the East to tell us their opinion of the matter. The only Eastern language of which I have some knowledge is Hebrew. And there is a Hebrew word today, as everyone who knows Hebrew knows, which is used for nature. In transcription it would be this: *teba*. This word occurs already in the Bible, in the Old Testament, but it does not have the meaning "nature." It had very interestingly the meaning of coin, something with a stamp on it; in other words, an absolute artifact. But we recognize the Greek in that if we use the Greek word for stamp: *charaktēr*. And that is exactly the form. So nature in the sense of form came into Hebrew, and by the way, in Arabic the same thing. But this word is borrowed from the Greek. The Old Testament does not know the word in the sense of nature. I know there are people who talk of the Psalms dealing with nature. They mean with trees and hills and animals, but that doesn't mean that the biblical author conceived of these things as natural things, that is an entirely different proposition. The Old Testament does not know nature. And I suppose similar things are true of the other Eastern languages. Of Hindi I have found out a bit by cross-examining a Hindu student. But still, is it not very strange: should they not have known the difference between a lion and a chair? Of course they did. There is a difference made, for example, between the work of man and the work of God: chairs are the work of man, the heavens are the work of God. But that is not nature strictly speaking. In order to find the Old Testament equivalent for what nature means, we would have to consider a passage like this, in Genesis 31:35: "And Rachel said to her father, let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me." Now what she means is that she is menstruating. Menstruation is the custom of women. There is an equivalent expression for that, for custom, and that is "way." This, it seems to me, is the prephilosophic equivalent for nature. One could say men knew at all times that different things have different behaviors, regular behaviors. That is I think the basic experience of which the interpretation as nature is a specific form which emerged in Greece.

The great poets are the ones who understand best to reactivate the primary understanding, the fresh understanding of things. I happen to remember a passage from a German poet, Goethe, in the first part of *Faust*, where Mephistopheles, the devil, tries to enter Faust's study in the disguise of a dog, of a poodle.[x] Faust, who can smell ghosts, is sure that it is not a mere poodle, but he has a very positivistic . . . Wagner, and he is sure there are no ghosts, he's just a plain poodle. And then he says: Look, it's a dog, no[t a] ghost. He snarls and barks, he lays down on his belly—and what is the English for what they do with the tail? He wags. All this is the custom of dogs. Even in this late stage[xi] this is reactivated. [4]Each kind of being has its peculiar custom or way. This is the basic

[x] Goethe, *Faust*, part 1 (1808), l. 1188.

[xi] That is, the late eighteenth century. Faust, part 1 was published in 1808.

experience. For example, let us look at the sun. It is rising in the east, running a certain course, and setting in the west. That is what we call regular behavior—the way, the custom of the sun. But there are eclipses, however, deviations; therefore, custom—it is[xii] not its necessity, a way or custom. Now in this way all beings have their way. Fire burns, dogs bark, women menstruate. But, and now comes the crucial point, what is true of these various kinds of being I mentioned is also true of such kinds of beings as[5] the Spartans, the Persians, the Moabites, and any other tribe: they all have their custom and way. The crucial point is that here in this stage of reflection, the customs of a tribe, the way of a tribe, and the way of what we call now a natural species is not radically distinguished. Of course it must have been sensed in some way, but it has not been made explicit. From here we must start if we want to understand what nature originally means. But before I go on, I would like to find out what you for example would have to say for our enlightenment.

Student: I'm afraid I can't really enlighten you, since I haven't made such an exhaustive study.

LS: But, for example, what is the word you use now in Japanese for nature?

Student: It's more the Kantian view that you have mentioned, some very all-embracing, vague thing over the universe.

LS: Does it mean something like "the whole"?

Student: Yes, I think so. In the case of Chinese, they conceive some single divine spirit bringing order to the universe, but in Japanese they have a notion of a multiplicity of spirits.

LS: Is this term used also in Japanese when you speak of natural science?

Student: Yes.

LS: That came through after modern Western science became known in Japan? But you would not apply this term, the term for nature, to the dog?

Student: I think you would, yes.

LS: Well, the conversation I had with the Hindu student was this—that was many years ago here in Chicago. He used all the modern terms in translating the Sanskrit expressions without any hesitation, and I tried to warn him of this. And then at a given moment the key word he used in a comment was "religion," and knowing that there is no Greek word for religion, for example, nor an Old Testament word for religion, I asked him what was the meaning of that term. First I asked him to write it down for me. It was the word dharma. Then I said: What does dharma mean, primarily? I learned gradually that it is something like the way of a thing and is not limited to the meaning of religion. As far as I

[xii] That is, the eclipses and deviations.

could find out at that time, dharma, "the way"—it means religion—is really the way of man. It is understood that the way of man is the way prescribed by the sacred thoughts of the Hindus. That I found quite enlightening. Can you tell something of the East Asians?

Student: . . .

LS: And in this context, the Japanese equivalent of nature occurs, you say, when they make this statement. Yes?

Student: I think there is something in Zen Buddhism which distinguishes between the contemplation of the beautiful or the natural as distinct from the creative, almost similar to the distinction that Plato made.

LS: Well, here we are confronted with an awkward situation. If I may make a guess, that you do not know this from the original language; you know this from Western reports. That is not good enough for our purposes. That would be the question. By the way, even such an expression as "the whole" as we use it, or "the world" is also a very great problem. For example, in the Old Testament there is no word for "world," so far as I can see. Heaven and earth and what is between them is I think the equivalent for that, but that means that what is more in the foreground is the fundamental split, heaven and earth, than the unity. And the Greek word for world, the cosmos, was coined at a relatively late time, sixth century or so, so that even there there is a question. But the word "nature" is of particularly great importance.

Now if we assume for a moment that this is correct, that in a more basic stratum of human understanding there is an awareness that different kinds of beings have different ways or customs than cats, lions, and so on—but of special interest is of course their own way to them, not the way of any brute or plant. [6][Human beings] become aware of the fact that other tribes have other customs, different customs. Now they do not leave it at [7]the observation that the customs of the others are just different: in the decisive respect they appear to be bad. I don't say this happens always, but it is possible that it happens, and that is surely one of the premises of Greek philosophy. The classic presentation of that occurs in Herodotus's *History*. For example, a tribe regards it as customary, [as] its way, to bury their dead. The neighboring tribe burns the dead. That is not only different in the sense that you can do it this way or you can do it that way, but it is abominable to do it differently than we do it. Another example: sacrificing human beings. It is not just different for a people which doesn't do that, but it is also an abomination to them. Generally stated, only the ancestral things, i.e., our ancestral things, are good. And the other people's ancestral things, well, they would perhaps say that everyone must follow the customs of his ancestors—that can't be helped—but the other customs, the other ancestral customs, are of course not good, are as a whole not good.

Now in this situation there appears a kind of man who is presented classically in Greek literature by Odysseus, the very Odysseus who is the very first man, the first human

being to use the word nature according to Aristotle.[xiii] Now this man is compelled to travel. You know Odysseus wanted to come home to his wife in Ithaca and not stay away for ten years as he had to, but being compelled to travel, he had his eyes open, looked around and observed, as[8] [Homer] said at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, the many cities and their different minds. Here a certain detachment from the ancestral as ancestral emerges: the Greeks do it this way, the Phoeceans do it that way. Well, of course he would act this way at home but he is somewhat hesitant to condemn the Phoeceans because they do it differently. We had a discussion of that at the very beginning of the course when one of the students was worried that what I suggested leads to parochialism. I believe that the philosophic tradition from its very beginning was opposed to parochialism, because the awareness of variety is presupposed by philosophy. That doesn't mean that a given man who calls himself a philosopher or a professor of philosophy may not be very parochial, but that is surely an uninteresting case. As Aristotle said it very simply in the fifth book of the *Ethics*, fire burns in Persia as well as in Greece, but the just things differ in Persia from the things in Greece.[xiv] Well, for example, laws regarding inheritance [on the part] of females and other things: here it becomes clear in the first place that the simple equation which we can truly say is coeval with man (because we too fall back on it all the time, we have to) of the ancestral with the good or with the true becomes doubtful. In the second book of the *Politics*, in a passage which we will have to take up later, a sentence occurs: We seek the good and not the ancestral.[xv] That is the most revolutionary sentence ever said, and yet an absolutely necessary sentence, come to think of it. That ancestral is to be preserved which is good, but that ancestral which is bad should not be preserved. And this discovery, I mean, with eyes open and with full clarity about what it means, is valid for man as man, as appears on reflection. Every man can be brought to see that, that the ancestral as ancestral is not identical with the good. If in a given case it should coincide with the good, it would be a coincidence; [there is] no essential identity. Now this I think is a simple reply to the historicist argument. It is relatively unimportant where this distinction was made, where this distinction was discovered. Once it is discovered, one cannot possibly go back behind it.

Now let us apply this to the primeval notion of way or custom in the light of the observation of these travelers, of which Odysseus is the mythical and Herodotus perhaps the best empirical example. [9]A splitting of this fundamental notion of way or custom into nature on the one hand and *nomos* on the other [takes place]. I will now use these terms and first write them here in transcription: *physis*, *nomos*. [LS writes on the blackboard] That dogs bark and wag their tails, that fire burns, that is natural. It is inherent in the fire and the dogs. That the Jews eat no pork and the Hindus no beef is not natural, which doesn't mean it is bad, but it is not natural. It depends on something different, on establishment, agreement, or to spell out the full meaning of what *nomos* means: people

---

[xiii] Strauss might have meant to say Homer, not Aristotle. See Strauss's introduction to *History of Political Philosophy*, 2-3; see also the transcript of Strauss's course on Natural Right, 1962, session 5 ("the first man we know who spoke of nature was the wily Odysseus"). The transcript is available on the Strauss Center website.

[xiv] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b.

[xv] *Politics* 1269a.

reason about what is good or bad for them. They have experiences about that, experiences including imagination, and at a certain moment they freeze the results of[10] [this reasoning about their experiences]. This is *nomos*. And the freezing is necessary because the questions must be decided somehow; there is need for stability. This implies that there is something by nature good for man as man, or bad for man as man by nature. A simple example: hemlock is bad for man as man, as you can easily find out, but regarding pork and cattle, that is not manifestly bad for man. That may still be so, but that would be on an entirely different basis. So the key point which I have to make is this. According to the textbook version, the distinction between *physis* and *nomos*, between nature and convention, is due to the so-called sophists, of whom I have to speak later. That is not true. The term "nature" means, because nature is a term of distinction, the discovery of *nomos* in contradistinction to nature. The two things are inseparable. And that this distinction is not limited to the sophists[xvi]—

—shown by a very common thing. One of the key terms of the tradition after Plato and Aristotle is the term "natural law" in the sense of a moral law. But what is the law which is not natural? In the first place, the positive law. The positive law is the law made, established, posited. That is only the Latin translation of the Greek word [*thesis*], which is used as an equivalent for *nomos*. The distinction between nature and convention—you cannot understand a line in Plato and Aristotle if you do not know that. What the difference between Plato and Aristotle and the so-called sophists is, I will take up later, but the distinction itself is presupposed. To illustrate it by one or two examples: [first], in the discussion of slavery in the first book of the *Politics*, the standard in the discussion is the distinction between the man who is a slave by nature and the man who is a slave by law or convention. The only one who can be legitimately a slave is the slave by nature, who is by nature singled out for slavery. [Second], in the discussion of economics, which means household management (also in the first book), the distinction between natural wealth and conventional wealth. Natural wealth is the wealth which as such sustains you. Conventional wealth is the wealth which does not necessarily sustain you, as you see in every famine, where you can have thousands of gold coins and may starve, but if you have rye or meat you will not starve. And from this simple example you can follow this up. So the distinction between natural and conventional wealth is the core of Aristotle's economic teaching. And when they seek the best regime they mean the regime which is best according to nature, not according to any establishment, because any establishment, every establishment will of course say it is the best regime. But the best regime by establishment is not the best regime in itself, by nature. So this distinction is absolutely fundamental, and it is one of the weaknesses of the usual presentation of Greek or classical political philosophy that the decisive importance of the distinction is not recognized. Yes?

Student: But doesn't the concept of nature which you just discussed have something to do with the notion of establishment? This is why I say it. You gave the example of something being good and bad by nature and you talked about hemlock. Granted that hemlock will kill most men—I mean, the particular criterion for saying that something is good or bad, is that correct? The criterion is that hemlock will kill. What I meant by

[xvi] The tape was changed at this point.

establishment was that this criterion is available. Now the problem of good and bad by nature, other than such simple things, is the problem of the acceptance of criteria.

LS: They would simply say that it is not left to your arbitrariness to accept or not accept it. An indication of that is that our loving to live, our desire to live, is a natural desire, not a desire which can be abandoned or changed around like the desire for collecting stamps of any other fad. Surely the things are more complex in the case of man, but they would still say, and Aristotle makes it perfectly clear that what brings the city into being is primarily the desire to live, and therefore the desire for protection against violent death. Then you view it already in the light of certain modern notions, especially present-day notions according to which there are no natural desires; all desires are somehow based on values, and the values themselves have been posited by free acts of human beings. That is wholly alien to them. Man has a nature just as any other natural being has a nature, and this nature implies certain desires or inclinations without which this nature wouldn't be what it is.

Student: This disturbs me too, because this implies that nature is our standard. Yet part of nature is bad, therefore part of our standard is bad.

LS: But what do you mean, "part of nature is bad"? Give me an example.

Student: Well, in the *Ethics*, some of the passions need to be controlled, need to be suppressed. How do you select what part of nature needs to be controlled by another part of nature? You have to have another standard saying, "This part of nature we favor and this part we do not favor." We do not favor feeding hemlock to people, even though it is part of nature.

LS: I will take up your point immediately, but one could for example say that rattlesnakes are as natural beings as lambs, or any other beings some of us enjoy. But still, that nature is good does not mean that all natural beings are meant for the well-being of man. That is a rather simplistic view of which Aristotle makes an occasional use in the first book of the *Politics*, but that is not what he seriously meant. And regarding the other point, say, the passions, especially the passions[11] which I think we all would agree that they should be curbed, are these passions not natural? That is a question, whether these passions which we have especially in mind are not a kind of excrescences. What were called passions were called later on diseases of the mind, I mean obsessions. Have you ever heard of that? Now is not an obsession a pathological state, i.e., the state of a diseased nature? That would be a question. I mean, you cannot simply say the fact that he is [obsessed] does not make him good. In the modern naturalistic view, everything that is is as natural as everything else; then of course the most fantastic obsession is as natural as the most supreme wisdom. If you start from this notion of nature or of fact, then it is a foregone conclusion that all value judgments are arbitrary. But this now is a question which may be raised: Is not man, for instance, a being with a specific structure, and that the understanding of that structure permits us to distinguish between what is natural, needed for an essential part of his normal healthy state, and what is an excrescence? You can say that I am saying a lot, but these other people also say a lot, as comes out when

they are compelled to say in the end the distinction between lunatics and non-lunatics is fundamentally a conventional distinction. Every society draws a distinction between lunatics and non-lunatics, but you can draw the line as you please; it depends entirely on value judgments. That is also a tall order. On another occasion I gave this example from Melville: nature didn't give me my eyes, an ophthalmologist in Philadelphia did.[xvii] He was one who had poor eyesight and had to undergo an operation. But that is a bit shortsighted of Melville or his character to say that, because what did the ophthalmologist do? He changed something regarding that eye with a view to normal human eyesight. Who gave him that model? Nature.

Student: But there's an improvement of this model as well. He goes beyond nature in this case.

LS: In a way, yes. Surely there are human arts to some extent, that was admitted, that improve on nature. That is possible to some extent. But even these improvements are guided by nature. Now what is a good example of an unquestionable improvement on nature?

Student: When you go from 20/20 to 20/15 in your vision, this is an improvement, certainly.

LS: But that would not apply to a man who had that already. Let us assume having protection against inclement weather of various kinds, too hot or too cold. Clothes surely are not natural but artificial. But what do we do here? We consider the shape of the human body, we consider the needs of the human body. With a view to nature we supply certain arts which nature itself does not directly supply. But still nature would be that with a view to which we make even this improvement, that is what I have in mind. Yes?

Student: Is there a connection between this nature and what Spenser speaks of in "The Faerie Queen" as constancy that remains the same throughout all mutability and change?

LS: There is some. I do not know Spenser. To what extent does Spenser use in these reflections the distinction between natural things and artifacts?

Student: He seems troubled by the changes in things, not only in the seasons, days, and so forth, but what remains within them. I don't think that he does distinguish between the artifacts and the nonartifacts.

LS: What Aristotle says in the fourth chapter of this fourth book which we read shows the general lines of this point. Let us take the example of artifacts. It is perfectly clear that artifacts are derivative from natural things—at least the material is natural. And if the immediate material is already preformed by human art, ultimately you come back to the purely natural. Now you can apply this distinction in a way to the natural things themselves, namely, between the secondary, the shoe, and the primary, say the hide, to

[xvii] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857), chap. 21. See session 10, n. xxviii. Melville's character refers to "vision," not "eyes," and to an "oculist," not an "ophthalmologist."

the hide itself. And you can raise the question: While the hide is of course not manmade as such, what is that out of which the hide was made? And then, as Aristotle sketches it, you arrive at something like the four elements—we would say today the periodic system in chemistry. We go even beyond that by coming back to something like the atom and the intra-atomic structure. There is nothing in principle moving that. That is what Aristotle means by the first matter—you could almost say the first material, although that is an improper language, a metaphoric language even in Aristotle that you should speak of the matter which nature has and uses as it were the raw materials of nature herself as distinguished from her finished product. But in a metaphoric way it makes sense, and it is surely necessary to take this step in itself. So you reach then something which are the ultimate building stones, as people today say, of everything that is. This thought was of course perfectly clear to all Greek philosophers.

By the way, that is materialism proper, not as it is now understood where it is opposed to spiritualism, the admission of spiritual substances as distinguished from bodily substances. The primary meaning of materialism is the view that the whole can be understood by understanding the out of which of everything, that out of which everything came. Whether the out of which are the four elements or the atoms doesn't make any difference. The emphasis here is not on bodily but on "out of which." The out of which is inevitably bodily in this case, but that is not the primary consideration. You can also say, as was always said, that the out of which cannot explain it, because there must be something acting on the out of which to make the first atom explode. The first atom would not itself explain its explosion.

Then you come to something that Aristotle calls the effective cause. Such things as, say, attraction and repulsion, or intensification and rarefaction, are obviously of an entirely different character than the out of which. But in all these considerations, people seek something which is unchangeable. If it were changeable, it if were perishable, it could not explain all coming into being or perishing. Now one way of doing this, although it is more sophisticated, you can say, is to find the unchangeable in something like laws, which is not atoms, which is not attraction or repulsion, but something entirely different. We say today a mathematical formula. This also goes back to the Greeks, but the more immediate origin of what we call formula is exactly the Platonic–Aristotelian form. The form is the ancestor of the modern mathematical formula. One way of seeing that relatively clearly is simply to read Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. He speaks of forms all the time, and it seems merely to be the ordinary Aristotelian usage, but when you look more closely you see that this form is about to transform itself into the modern mathematical formula, modern natural law. So the seeking for the constant or the unchangeable which is always the same, that belongs to it from the very beginning, but it is not immediately [what is] meant by nature. That is my answer to your question. Yes?

Student: A consequence of this view would then be that the Aristotelian physics is the true theoretical physics, and that the modern physics is somehow derivative or is not a clear theoretical understanding.

LS: That is a very difficult question on which I cannot pronounce, surely not from this chair. You know? What one can say with safety is this, that physics we may say generally deals with moved things as moved things, therefore not with numbers. Numbers don't move. Modern physics is completely unable to understand one kind of motion, if I may say so, and these are the motions going on in the physicist as physicist—not the motions when he arranges the computer or what not, but the motions which take place, for example, in hypothesis formation. The Aristotelian physics is able to articulate that. You can put it this way. For Aristotle the motions going on in the physicist are more revealing than the motions of a falling stone. Modern physics starts rather from the falling stone than from the motion of the physicist. Granted that modern physics has had this terrific triumph—think of this fantastic thing that was possible, to make a theoretical construction which permitted [us] to understand the motions of the heavenly bodies along the terms of terrestrial mechanics. I mean, what is going on when a stone falls, that is gravitation. That was Newton's great work, a terrific triumph. But the question is whether this triumph did not go hand in hand with an increasing inability of the same natural science to understand the physicist, i.e., man himself. That is the question. If you want to have a fair judgment of the bargain, you have to consider both sides. You cannot merely consider the tremendous progress in one direction without taking into account the tremendous regress in another direction. Yes?

Student: But that only means that both might be wrong as theoretical statements. Our point of view was that we're assuming the possibility that Aristotle's view may be correct, that it is not limited by our horizon.

LS: Excuse me, we took up a much more limited proposition, though I believe not an irrelevant one. Is not Aristotle's analysis of the human or political things within its limits more profound, more enlightening than the views prevailing now? But if we speak of the overall position, you stated it very neatly. Both positions must be insufficient, that we must somehow assume. I believe that is certainly true and that the consequence would be to find something new. But what is characteristic of present-day philosophy, as far as I see it, is that this task plays practically no role. I believe that a man like Whitehead[xviii] had something of this kind probably in mind, but I believe the execution is of no use, [it] is a mere compromise. The preponderant views today, that is to say positivism on the one hand—and positivism doesn't see the problem at all because it is perfectly satisfied with modern natural science. The alternative school, which sees the essential limitations of modern science and which is most powerful today, is existentialism. Existentialism had abandoned the problem of a true cosmology altogether. Modern positivism, if I may try to formulate it more neatly, in fact identifies any possible cosmology with modern science or any future progresses of the same. Existentialism abandons the problem of cosmology. The problem of cosmology is maintained today almost exclusively by recollection, the fact that is existed in the past. And in the most elaborate form, I would still say it existed in Aristotle. Surely no one who knows what he is doing can be an Aristotelian, period. That is impossible. But Aristotle can still act for the foreseeable future as the best model we have, what we should try to get, and which surely I can't give but perhaps something

[xviii] Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), British mathematician and philosopher. Strauss might be referring to *The Concept of Nature* (1920) and *Science and the Modern World* (1925).

will come out in the future. But today the problem of cosmology is, I can say, practically abandoned. I think, by the way, that this is the gravest shortcoming of existentialism.

Student: I would think that this is one of their greatest triumphs, eliminating the necessity for thinking cosmologically.

LS: But they can't avoid it. I cannot state it now. I would have to remember certain things which I do not at the moment remember, but they cannot avoid it. It comes up especially in the greatest and most important case: in Heidegger's case, I think it is very clearly to be seen. What he regards as the highest principle—he would not permit us the use of that term, but for convenience sake—what he calls *to be*, in German *sein*, this presupposes that in one way or the other human beings, the human race, emerges out of a state in which it did not exist. He cannot deny this premise which he makes. In a way, he says so when he says this coming into being of man is a mystery. But a mystery means also a question, an unsolved question, but there is no place for the question in his doctrine. There is no longer a possibility of raising it any more. If he says a mystery, that means surely it is important, but there is no way anymore of transforming the mystery as mystery into a problem. Behind it is of course the whole modern development—for example, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and so on.

The subject which I have to take up now or at least next time is this. Now if it is true, what I asserted today, that the difference between political philosophy and political thought in general is this, that political philosophy is such political thought as views political things in the light of "nature," and nature means in the light of the distinction between nature and *nomos*, what are the fundamental alternatives originally? This can be stated as follows, in the simplest form. Are the just things, the things regarded as just, altogether conventional, or is there something natural in them? Perhaps a bit more intelligible: Is all right conventional, or is there a natural right? This is a question which becomes meaningful of course only on the basis of the distinction between nature and convention. That question was surely discussed and known before Aristotle, and even long before Socrates, and we will have to have a survey of these alternatives before we go on. I think it is not wise to begin that now. Yes?

Student: Would it be true that after the distinction between nature and convention ceased to be made, there was no longer any political philosophy?

LS: Let's not throw the baby out with the bath. The first stage was a new kind of political philosophy. When did nature cease to be the key term? Clearly I believe only with Kant, because until Kant—even in Rousseau, the term natural law, natural right, was still decisive, but in Kant's doctrine there is a clear distinction made between the natural laws in the sense of Newton's laws or any other laws of this kind, and the laws of freedom. Kant does no longer call the moral law the natural law. For Kant it is absolutely decisive that man must liberate himself from the apron strings of nature. I think that is clearer in Kant than anywhere else, but Kant still had a political philosophy, because he was sure that pure reason—reason not operating on any empirical material, on any empirical knowledge of man as all earlier political philosophy assumed—is able to give us

guidance. There is a law of reason which is in no way a law of nature. On this basis, Kant and his successors, especially Hegel, erected their structures. This was a very powerful doctrine in various modifications until a fairly short time ago. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, nevertheless, a decay of political philosophy did take place. The famous Britishers of the late nineteenth century were still somehow heirs to German classical philosophy, Bosanquet[xix] and such people. Well, there was also a civilized neo-Kantianism of some importance in Germany. And we must not entirely neglect that Utilitarianism, as developed by Bentham and John Stuart Mill, is[12] [not] traditional political philosophy, but [in] the concept of happiness, pleasures and so on there the notion of nature still gets into their argument in one way or another. I will speak of that later.

I will mention only one point. From the seventeenth century on, the distinction between nature and convention lost its evidence on the basis of a very simple thing which influences us directly or indirectly up to the present day. And you see the proof of that when you read present-day presentations of the nature–convention distinction, for example, in the book by Havelock, *The Liberal Temper*—not distemper—*The Liberal Temper in Classical Thought*.[xx] This man is wholly unable to understand the distinction, and he is not the only one. You can take the naturalist's prejudice [that everything is natural], but what does he mean more specifically? The distinction between nature and convention implies [that] it seems to be incompatible with a certain necessitarianism or determinism which emerged especially in the seventeenth century, meaning this: every custom, every law or convention is as much determined by[13] [preceding] causes as the falling of a stone. The notion of convention implies that there is a certain latitude of man, not to say freedom; there is a certain latitude and there is a certain arbitrariness. From this point of view, the strict determinism of men like Spinoza, for example, there cannot be anything arbitrary strictly speaking, because everything is fully determined.

I will take this up later on because I think it is one of the most important elements of modern thought, the disappearance of the distinction between nature and convention. But it lingers on, especially on a more popular level, [in] all the revolts against convention going on all over the world against all restraint in modern times. That is an appeal from convention, from arbitrary, manmade limitations to nature that I think plays a role up to the present day. But of course that is now relegated to a rather low level of reflection. It is no longer visible on the philosophical level, but it was powerful up to the eighteenth century, and there is a whole work of Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, that is very clearly based on the distinction between nature and convention. In one formula which he uses, civil society replaces natural inequality by conventional equality. The whole problem presupposes the distinction, but you see already here in Rousseau a great change: that Rousseau takes in this context the side of convention against nature, whereas according to the older view the natural has a higher rank than the conventional.[14]

[xix] Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923), English philosopher. His works include *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (1899) and *A Companion to Plato's* Republic *for English Readers* (1891).
[xx] Eric A. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (1957).

[1] Deleted “the presentation”
[2] Deleted “him”
[3] Moved “his”
[4] Deleted “various beings”
[5] Deleted “are”
[6] Deleted “they”
[7] Deleted “they”
[8] Deleted “he”
[9] Deleted “there takes place”
[10] Deleted “this treatment”
[11] Deleted “of”
[12] Deleted “neither”
[13] Deleted “precedent”
[14] Deleted: LS: Yes? That is the last question.
Q: I hate to interrupt the flow of ideas, but have we settled on the exact date for the exam?
A: Let us do this in the proper manner. We have three more meetings. Today is the fifteenth. We meet next week twice, then we meet on Monday the twenty-seventh for the last meeting. Theoretically we could have the examination on November 29th, but I imagine you would like to have a week. Is this a reasonable imagination on my part? Good. Let us then settle on December 4th and I will make a note of it. Since we are a bureaucracy, Mr. Faulkner, what did Mrs. Herlihy tell you regarding the place where we meet?
Q: She has requested a room, but it isn’t certain. She thinks it will be here.
A: So let us assemble next Monday in 122 with the prospect that we might have to move here and the Department will take care of it so that you get advance information. So the only thing I can say now is then this. We shall have the examination on December 4th, on Monday, 3:30 to 5:00. And we will need the whole time, except the five or ten minutes which are needed to explain the questions or question, and announce the penalties or rewards which govern this kind of thing. And the place will depend on what we find out later, in other words, whether it is here or in Social Science 122. Is this sufficiently clear? Good.

Session 14: 20 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: I would like first to conclude an argument I began last time, and then we will have a discussion. There are two questions here. What I tried to make clear last time is[1] the fundamental premise of classical political philosophy and even of modern political philosophy until a relatively short time ago: the distinction between nature and convention. Or differently stated, the original meaning of nature comes out clearly only if one sees it in contradistinction to convention. That very well-known distinction between natural and positive law, for example, is a most obvious example of what I said. Now once this nature was discovered in contradistinction to convention, it was possible and even necessary to raise the following question: Are the political things natural? And if they are, to what extent or in what sense? The laws are as it were by definition not natural. But obedience to the laws was considered to be justice: the most simple meaning of justice is lawabidingness. Hence the most incisive question: Are the just things merely conventional, or is there something which is right or just by nature? Are even the laws, the laws of the city, entirely conventional, or are they rooted in nature? The laws are the foundation or the work of the city. Is the city by nature? In the attempts to answer these questions it is presupposed that there are things which are by nature good for man as man, good for the body and good for the soul. The precise question is, therefore: What is the relation of what is good by nature for man to justice?

I will give a few specimens from philosophers prior to Socrates, ordinarily called the pre-Socratics, to illustrate the state of the discussion in the early period. The most famous of the pre-Socratics of whom we have fragments[2]—because all pre-Socratic philosophy is preserved only in fragmentary form—the greatest of these men who has pronounced on political matters is Heraclitus of Ephesus. He lived around 500 in Ephesus in Asia Minor. He said—and I read to you a few quotes. By the way, these fragments are available in English translation in a book by Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Harvard University Press, 1947). [3][Heraclitus] said, for example, that the people should fight for the laws, the *nomos*, as if for the city wall, and that all human laws are nourished by one which is divine.[ii] He seems to say that the laws of the city owe their dignity to the divine law which is the origin of the human laws. But this does not mean that he unqualifiedly preferred the rule of laws to the rule of men, for he also said [that] to obey the will of one man is also law, and "one man to me is worth ten thousand, if he is the best."[iii] It is not clear whether to obey the will of one man, if he is the best, is human law or the divine law.

But a still greater difficulty is caused by the following saying: "To God all things are noble, good, and just, but men have assumed some things to be just, others unjust."[iv] Here

---

[i] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 13-29.
[ii] Heraclitus, Fragments 44, 114, in Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 27, 32.
[iii] Fragment 49, *Ancilla*, 28.
[iv] Fragment 102, *Ancilla*, 31.

he seems to say that the distinction between justice and injustice is merely human. Men have assumed it; for God everything is just, or in other words, that justice is merely conventional. "This ordered universe (*cosmos*), which is the same for all, was not made by any one of the gods or men,[v] but it was ever and is and shall be ever-living Fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure."[vi] It seems that the divine law as Heraclitus understood it is something like the law of the cosmos, the law according to which the cosmic principle, fire, acts. And this fire is called by him divine because it is ever-living, whereas nothing else is ever-living, or everything else owes its life or being to that fire. It makes sense to identify that fire with the highest god, but to do so is also misleading. "That which alone is wise is one; it is willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus."[vii] In other words, you may call it Zeus, but you also may not call it Zeus. It is not literally true. Zeus was believed to be the king and father of gods and men. According to Heraclitus, the king and father of everything is war. War is both king of all and father of all, and it has shown some as gods, others as men. [4]War has made [some men] slaves, others free men. You see a distinction. This war—and war is in a strange way identical with the fire, the cosmic principle—has shown up some beings as gods, others as men; and on the other hand, it has made some men slaves and others free. Perhaps he intimates here [that] the distinction between gods and men has a different status than the distinction of slaves and free men. One might suggest that the distinction between gods and free men and the corresponding distinction belongs to the divine or cosmic law, the distinction between various species of beings; whereas the distinction between slaves and free men belongs to the human law which is indeed nourished by the divine law, as he puts it, but for this very reason not the same as the divine law. Well, I think I leave it at that. You see the fundamental questions are obviously articulated here, but there is no developed doctrine as you will find it in the works of Plato and Aristotle.

I will also give you an indication of a different pre-Socratic doctrine, taking two fragments from Democritus. Democritus is a contemporary of Socrates. Apparently they didn't know each other. He is the greatest representative of the atomistic doctrine, the teaching of atoms which has had such an overwhelming success in modern times. Now I read to you two fragments of his to indicate to you the kind of considerations which were important in this early philosophy.

> For human beings it is one of the necessities of life to have children, arising from nature and primeval law. It is obvious in the other animals too: they all have offspring by nature, and not for the sake of any profit.

Now this distinction between nature and profit means this. They have a natural inclination which has nothing to do with calculation of profits, which induces them to generate beings of their kind.

> And when they are born the parents work and rear each the best that they can and are anxious for them while they are small, and if anything happens to them, their

[v] In original: "of mankind"
[vi] Fragment 30, *Ancilla*, 26.
[vii] Fragment 32, *Ancilla*, 27.

> parents are grieved. But for man it has now become an established belief [something conventional—LS] that there should be also some advantage from the offspring [to the parents—LS].[viii]

What is natural, Democritus said, is that beings generate beings of their kind and take care of them. But that the offspring should take care of the old ones, that you find only among humans, and it is not natural. It has been established. This is of course a very radical doctrine, because it means that this filial foundation of all society, namely, the family order with respect for parents, for father and mother, is not natural. And that has very great consequences that, for example, beating of one's father, a famous subject of Aristophanes's comedy, you know, where Socrates is represented as having taught that the son might beat his father, at least if the son is wise and the father is unwise. I illustrate it by another fragment of Democritus. "I do not think that one should have children. I observe in the acquisition of children many great risks and many griefs, whereas a harvest is rare, and even when it exists, it is thin and poor."[ix] Democritus uses his human reason, which gives him certain freedom from the natural instincts, to say that it is a great risk you take by following that instinct. You might be very badly off then. In another fragment here he suggests that one should rather adopt children: then you have a certain guarantee that you get the right merchandise. You see, that is an entirely different application but the question is obviously the same, the distinction between nature and convention.

According to the ordinary textbook view, the distinction between nature and convention is an invention of the so-called sophists. This I think is simply wrong. What does this really mean? There are certain individuals, mostly non-Athenians, perhaps all non-Athenians, who came to Athens especially in Socrates's lifetime and taught teachings which were generally regarded as undesirable, as subversive; and the distinction between nature and convention played a considerable role in that teaching. The ordinary objection to the sophists was a very crude one: they taught for pay, and a gentleman doesn't teach for pay. This is a very gentlemanly view but surely not one which would befit a professor, therefore the sophists have found many defenders in our age. One can perhaps say it was just a prejudice against the sophists, this way of earning their living. The philosophers Plato and Aristotle did not base their objection to the sophists on this ground, because it would easily have given rise to the question: What are your sources of income? Well, Plato happened to be a wealthy man, but Socrates was notoriously poor and apparently he had no visible means of support. One has to study Xenophon's treatise, or dialogue rather, *Oeconomicus*, management of the household, where this question of Socrates's invisible means of support is delicately discussed. It seems that Socrates had wealthy friends, and the things of a friend are common according to a Greek proverb. That seems to have solved the problem.

But that was not the serious issue. The serious issue was that the sophists were regarded by Plato, by Socrates and Plato as a kind of prostitute, people prostituting philosophy or wisdom. One could say that the sophists in the Platonic–Aristotelian meaning are akin to

---

[viii] Democritus, Fragment 278, *Ancilla*, 117.
[ix] Fragment 276, *Ancilla*, 116.

what is now called an intellectual. The term intellectual is now strictly value-free; it is a descriptive term. But it is a difficult term to define for purely descriptive purposes, because in contradistinction to such things as physicians and other professions, it is impossible to distinguish the genuine article from the fake. You know a genuine physician can be distinguished frequently from the fake physician, but it is impossible to speak of a fake intellectual. The distinction doesn't apply here. You can distinguish between a fake physicist and a genuine physicist, a fake scholar and a genuine scholar, but not [between a fake and a genuine] intellectual. That shows there is a certain grave difficulty here, and this difficulty was in a way anticipated in the Platonic–Aristotelian–Socratic view of the sophist as a sham wise man. They surely were very intelligent, very bright, very clever men, but something apparently was fundamentally wrong. To establish that is by no means easy. But we have the best clue to this phenomenon today by starting from the phenomenon [of] the intellectual. I don't believe that is very helpful if we take up the subject, the political doctrines of the sophists. Generally speaking, one can say the sophists were conventionalists, i.e., asserted that all right is conventional. But this view was not however a preserve of the sophists; quite a few philosophers held the same view. I don't believe it is very helpful to go into that question.

Now I would like to add one more point, and then we open our discussion. The most important premise of classical political philosophy is the notion of nature, with the implied distinction from convention. But there is also another condition of classical political philosophy which we must at least mention. Political philosophy was preceded not only by philosophy but also by what would be called in a literal translation political science, *politike episteme*. But political science doesn't mean there what it means now. Political science means there the skill, the art, the knowledge, the understanding by virtue of which a man is able to manage the affairs of the city well by deed and by speech. One could perhaps say that the sophists are characterized by the fact that they claimed to be teachers of political science thus understood. There can be no question that the classical political philosophers admitted that there is such a skill, which is not identical with political philosophy. The simple sign of that is that this political skill, this political knowledge, does not require the distinction between nature and convention. It simply grows out of political life. The clearest statement of this notion of political science you will find in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, book 1, chapter 4, where Aristotle describes what the statesman must know about the revenue, defense, and the other important fields. At the end [of the passage] he makes the remark that it is helpful for this kind of knowledge to read books of travel about other countries and histories, the same thing which an intelligent political man would do today, of course, also. But philosophy does not enter here at all. The source of this chapter in the *Rhetoric*, and this is a well-known fact, is a chapter in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, book 3, chapter 6. Aristotle only summarizes what Socrates is said to have said to Glaucon, the hero of Plato's *Republic*, in some conversation. I read to you only the beginning to give you an idea.[x]

> [Ariston's son], Glaucon, was attempting to become an orator and striving for headship in the city, though he was less than twenty years old; and none of his

[x] Strauss reads from the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Memorabilia*, translated by E. C. Marchant and O. J. Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 3. 6.1-6.

> friends or relations could check him, though he would get himself dragged from the platform and make himself a laughing-stock. Only Socrates, who took an interest in him for the sake of Plato and Charmides, managed to check him.
> For once on meeting him, he stopped him and contrived to engage his attention by saying: "Glaucon, have you made up your mind to be our chief man in the city[xi]?"
> "I have, Socrates."
> "Well, upon my word there's no more honourable ambition in the world; for obviously, if you gain your object, you will be able to get whatever you want, and you will have the means of helping your friends: you will lift up your father's house and exalt your fatherland; and you will make a name for yourself first at home, later on in Greece, and possibility, like Themistocles, among the barbarians as well; wherever you go, you will be a man of mark."
> When Glaucon heard this, he felt proud and gladly lingered.
> Next Socrates asked: Well, Glaucon, as you want to win honour, is it not obvious that you must benefit your city?"
> "Most certainly."
> "Don't be reticent, then; but tell us how you propose to begin your services to the city."
> "As Glaucon continued[xii] dumb, apparently considering for the first time how to begin, Socrates said: "If you wanted to add to a friend's fortune, you would set about making him richer. Will you try, then, to make your city richer?"
> "Certainly."
> "Would she not be richer if she had a larger revenue?"
> "Oh yes, presumably."
> "Now tell me, from what sources are the city's revenues at present derived and what is their total? No doubt you have gone into this matter, in order to raise the amount of any that are deficient and supply any that are lacking."
> "Certainly not," exclaimed Glaucon, "I haven't gone into that."
> "Well, if you have left that out, tell us the expenditure of the city. No doubt you intend to cut down any items that are excessive."

In this way there is a complete summary given of the key themes of knowledge which the statesman should have. You see it is very amusing, but it is at the same time very instructive, because we have here a complete enumeration of the themes of political knowledge as distinguished from political philosophy. I believe I stop here at this point and take up the questions before I continue. There are two questions here; there may be others which come up. Mr. Butterworth asks this question:

> You have repeatedly criticized science and positivism as methodologies incapable of answering the why of their being, though they can answer what they are about. How do you account for the fact that they neither pose this question nor need to pose it, since they simply accept the given and work towards the unknown? The question is not why science, but rather how can science give us more knowledge?

[xi] In original: "state"
[xii] In original: "remained"

Sure, they would say that, but is it not necessary nevertheless to raise the question: Why science? I mean, is it not generally speaking a sign of reflectiveness, thoughtfulness, wisdom, if one can answer the question: Why do you do what you are doing?

Student: Generally it is, but it seems to me that some of them would say that there is no answer which they can accept to this question, and therefore it does away with the question.

LS: I know, but what is possible in this sense is of course not by this very fact justified. I know that people do that. But until a relatively short time ago people, scientists, took it for granted that they know what science is about. I mean, even today you read from time to time still the statement that science is a certain form in which a peculiar kind of organism, as they say—men—find their bearings in the universe. Dogs live quite well as dogs without any science; they could stand on their heads and never produce science. Men lived without science for many ages in many countries, but then it was found that science is more conducive to human survival, as people would say, than the absence of science. That is a view which was quite common a short while ago, and you hear it even today from time to time. Now it is indeed the view that science cannot answer that question, but that means that science is radically unphilosophic. That means also that one cannot leave it, philosophy cannot leave it at merely describing science, an unphilosophic pursuit. It must do more than that. Positivism is an attempt to describe science and to answer the question [of] what science is. It does not transcend the horizon of science. And it is necessary to transcend that horizon; therefore positivism is not philosophic. That is what I asserted indeed.

Student: I don't see why philosophy has to pose the question.

LS: Is it not a necessary question to have clarity about the place occupied by science in the economy of human life individually and socially?

Student: Philosophy can answer this question for philosophy, but it cannot answer it for—

LS: But the trouble is this, that [for] these people who say that philosophy cannot answer it, the only philosophy is one which is as it were the interior decoration of science and cannot give an account of it. Now I turn to the next question, by Mr. _____. He is troubled by the seemingly irreducible gap between nature in the sense in which Aristotle uses it and nature in the sense in which he understands it.

> I can quite agree with Aristotle's statement that the form into which a thing grows is the natural end of the thing. I can see for instance that an acorn has in itself something which makes it grow into an oak tree, and that to be an oak tree is the natural end of an acorn. But when Aristotle applies this argument to human beings, he seems to draw an unwarranted analogy. He says that by nature man has a rational faculty. With this I agree. But he goes on to say that it is also natural for man to attain moral excellence. This clearly does not follow in my view. That

> man has by nature a rational faculty opens up a whole spectrum of possible ends, some of which may be mutually incompatible. Indeed, man may use the rational faculty to become morally excellent, but that is a matter of proper education, as Aristotle himself admits. For a man may just as well use his rational faculty to become a clever swindler, and yet Aristotle would say that moral excellence, and moral excellence alone, is natural to man. To say this is in my view tantamount to making the deliberate choice of an end or the positing of an end which the nature does not guarantee. The equation of acorn becoming oak tree on the one hand, and men becoming morally excellent on the other, is not valid.

I had a conversation about this with Mr. _____ in my office and I would like to repeat that. That there is something parallel to man so far as the human body is concerned I believe everyone would admit, because the relation of the human embryo and the grown-up human being is exactly the same as that of oak tree and acorn. And Aristotle makes now an assumption which present-day scientific psychology would not admit, namely, that there is something called the soul. "Psychology" means literally the science of the soul, but I think psychologists today don't speak any more of the soul. Aristotle assumes we cannot understand ourselves if there is not such a thing as the soul. It is very hard to define, but there is something else apart from the body and apart from the brain which is ultimately more important than the body for being a human being. Now if there is then also a soul, it would make sense to say there can also be an end, a term of growth for the soul as there is for the body, and there are certain signs of it. You all know the phenomenon called senility—not from your own experience, but you may have observed that. It is a well-known fact that when men have reached a certain age their memory lapses, and other things. So there is also here the phenomenon of growth and decay, just as in the body. The lines are somewhat differently drawn, the term of bodily growth is reached earlier than the term of mental growth, but they are there. You are willing to grant that this specifically human thing can be called, the peculiarity of man can be called reason. You don't take issue with that. Then it would mean that the perfection of man would be the full development of his rationality, that after a man has cultivated his reason to the highest degree, assuming that the initial gift was not too limited, that would be the most perfect, the most excellent man.

The specific question is this: What has this to do with moral excellence? Is there any relation between cultivated rationality and morality? Aristotle would say there is. Morality is rationality applied to human conduct. In other words, rationality can be applied to all kinds of things, to the observation of stars and so on, but it can also be applied to human conduct, and a man who conducts himself rationally, that is the same thing as the gentleman or the moral man. That is the point. In other words, you would have to raise the question: Is the clever swindler—who, if he is well placed, even if he is caught sees that he will get an early parole (I refer to a well-known case in the state of Illinois now)—is the clever swindler a rational man? Must you not take into consideration the fact that swindling and stealing and all these other things are a kind of parasitical activity which presuppose[s] that there are people who produce things honestly and that the very possibility of production, of labor, without which there could not be any human life to speak of, would be destroyed if parasitism were the general

rational rule of human activity? And many other considerations which we all know, and were we confronted with a child who was wondering whether he should take the career of a policeman or rather of a robber, we would easily reproduce these simple arguments. Of course they may be too simple. Some people might say that a generous admixture of crooks is helpful for society, because without it you wouldn't have an alert police force and all the other good qualities going into that. There might be some element of truth in that, but you must have heard the words: Honesty is the best policy.

Student: My point is, how is this connected with man's nature?

LS: Because reason is man's nature, and reason applied to conduct is morality. This is a provisional statement. That reason applied to conduct doesn't become effective except through habituation doesn't do away with the fundamental rationality. To have your body in shape, you have to be in training, and there is also needed a certain training of the soul so that one becomes habitually rational. For example, people who are by nature irascible have to learn . . .

[Due to mechanical difficulty, the remainder of the lecture is inaudible.][xiii]

[1] Deleted "what is"
[2] Deleted "and who dealt"
[3] Deleted "he"
[4] Moved "some"

[xiii] As noted by the transcriber. According to a student's notes, Strauss continued to field and respond to questions for the remainder of the session.

Session 15: 22 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: [in progress] —the good and bad things as distinguished form the cosmos. Socrates was not concerned, according to this view—and that is supported by some remarks of Aristotle as well as of Xenophon, and even of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*—Socrates was not concerned with the nature of all things, including the nature of man, but only with the human things. We note in passing that in this remark of Cicero, which you find near the beginning of the fifth book of the *Tusculan Disputations* of Cicero—what is this remark? Philosophy had to be compelled to study the human things. To repeat that point: Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from heaven, to establish it in the city, to introduce it into the household and to compel it to inquire about the human things.[ii] Those of you who know Plato's *Republic* will remember the emphasis on compulsion: the philosopher has to be compelled to go into politics. Here it is enlarged: philosophy has to be compelled to deal with political matters. But this is only in passing. Yet according to a very general impression the sophists, prior to Socrates, turned to the study of the human things. In other words, it seems that Socrates was preceded in his interest in the human things, which includes the political things, by the sophists. Socrates never speaks about his predecessors explicitly, but a kind of substitute for Socrates, the Athenian Stranger[1] in Plato's *Laws,* does speak explicitly about his predecessors. *Laws,* tenth book.

Who were these predecessors? They were materialists in the old sense of the word; that is to say, they sought that out of which all things have come into being and they regarded this "out of which" as the first thing. They understood by nature the coming into being, the genesis attending on the first thing. That is a very vague expression, deliberately chosen, meaning the coming into being which is directly connected with the first things, which the first things bring about. These people implied as a matter of course (and that is a point which we have discussed before) a distinction between the natural things and the things which are by convention. The first things, say, the elements, the atoms or whatever it may have been, produce by themselves the natural things, and these are of course also the artifacts. But the more important case is the things which are by convention. "Things by convention" means things which are merely by men holding them, "holding" in the sense in which it is used in law: the holding of trusts. That means holding them to be, or positing them, or agreeing as to their being. An artifact, a shoe, is of course not merely by men holding it to be, but other things are merely by men's holding them to be or positing them. According to these predecessors, for example, the gods are by convention, the just things are by convention. As for the noble things, these people said what is by nature noble is opposed to what is by convention noble. By convention it is noble to help other human beings—to slave for other human beings, as they put it—whereas by nature it is noble to lord it over the others. The Athenian Stranger—this other Socrates, we can say—asserts over against them that there are things which are by nature right, and not all things

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 13-29.
[ii] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5. 10. Also see Cicero, *Brutus* 31.

which are right are right merely by convention. I mentioned before that this distinction between nature and convention is preserved in classical political philosophy. The simplest sign is the distinction between natural and positive law, which is crucial for the whole tradition. But this distinction is no longer understood today easily, and this is due to the influence on our thought of modern philosophy.

Let me explain this by first speaking of an analogous case. In classical philosophy, and especially in Aristotle, a phenomenon is recognized by the name of chance. For example, a simple story is: You go to the marketplace in order to buy something there, and you happen to meet a creditor. You didn't go there in order to meet the creditor: you happen to meet him. Or you dig in your garden in order to plant potatoes, and you happen to find a treasure. Chance is something which occurs. You can of course try to explain it; you can say: I found the treasure because someone put it there, and he put it there in very unquiet times, war or whatnot. And you can go on and on. You can also give an explanation of why you went to the garden, say, in order to dig, to plant potatoes; and the potatoes you wanted to plant because you wanted food, and you needed food because you are a human being, and [you] can go on and on. But all explanations, however developed, do not do away with the fact that it was chance that the two lines crossed. Say this is a chance event, and this is your motivation for going to the marketplace or for going to the garden or whatever the case may be, and this is the reason why the creditor came there or why the treasure was there, and however much you may explain, this meeting remains as unexplainable as it is in itself. That is one of the key points in classical philosophy, and especially in Aristotle. The case of chance shows that there are events which cannot be meaningfully traced to precedent causes. That is the point.

Now the case of *nomos* or convention is analogous to the case of chance, for you have a given *nomos*, a given convention, and you may explain it in the light of its conditions. For example, left driving [or] right driving,[iii] to take a simple case; and you may explain how it comes that the British drive [on the] left, and you may find out all kinds of causes in the British national character, in British history and whatnot, but according to this view it would still cease to be an unexplainable act, namely, because its being, the being of the *nomos*—its validity, as we say—remains still due to the fact that it has become held or accepted by the society in question. This was the tacit premise of the old notion of *nomos* in contradistinction to *physis*. The general ontological principle is, to repeat, that there are things, events which cannot be meaningfully traced to precedent causes. What you can do and what you must do is to explain the general possibility of chance. Surely that you have to do. That is what Aristotle does, for example, in the second book of his *Physics*, but that of course is no further explanation of the particular chance event. The same applies with necessary modifications to convention.

Now to this view was made the following objection in the modern era: Conventions originate in human acts, and these human acts are as necessary, as natural as any natural event. Let us take the simplest case. A convention comes into being because some legislator laid it down. Why did he lay it down? How is it connected with his life, perhaps with his subconscious life, with his drives and so on? That is as explicable in principle as

[iii] That is, driving on the left or the right side of the road.

the fall of a stone or whatever else it may be. In other words, according to this way of reasoning, the distinction between natural and conventional can only be provisional. I have referred already before to Spinoza in the fourth chapter of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, [at the] beginning, [where] you have the clearest statement of this position.[iv] Yet, as Spinoza admits, this general consideration is not very helpful in practice unless one shows the kind of[2] [preceding] causes which explain the convention. Now what would this kind of cause be? For instance, the climate, the character of the territory, the fauna and flora of the society, the race of the human beings, and so on. And this kind of explanation of what we now call social institutions was carried on throughout modern times, more in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, probably, than not. But what does this imply? That a given social institution is perfectly explicable in terms of the conditions under which the legislator legislated. It means that the legislator has prescribed in each case what was best for his people. To take a simple example, if there was an abundance of women, the proportion of males to females was, let us say, 1:2, [3][the legislator] did not establish monogamy, but if the proposition was roughly 1:1, he established monogamy. This kind of thing. The legislator has prescribed in each case what is best for his people. In other words, all laws or customs are sensible; you only have to find the reason. Or all legislators were wise: you find this view sketched in Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, and it plays a very great role in the book, but Montesquieu knew that it was insufficient. Now this possibility of reducing the conventional to the natural, implying that all conventions or laws are sensible or wise, proves to be too sanguine. We have to take into consideration the error of the legislators—one or many doesn't make any difference—their follies, their superstitions, and so on. And still further difficulties were encountered. As a consequence, people abandoned the notion that conventions can be explained in any way as made by man, the individuals or society. Conventions, or in the widest sense laws and institutions, are not made but grow. This great change occurred at the end of the eighteenth century.

Now this growth of institution or laws is of course fundamentally different from the growth of plants and animals. It is a quasi-growth, a kind of second nature, but that is not a simple natural growth. Now this quasi-growth, this kind of second nature came to be called history, history not in the sense of human explorations or of records made by humans, but as they say, of a dimension of reality different from the dimension of nature. So we may conclude that in modern times the distinction between nature and history has become the substitute for the distinction between nature and convention, and that is the reason why the distinction between nature and convention is so difficult for us to understand. We have to emancipate ourselves to some extent from a certain modern way of thinking.

Now I return to the argument of the tenth book of Plato's *Laws*, where a quasi-Socrates, the Athenian Stranger, speaks about his predecessors. Now he states his difference from

---

[iv] See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181.13-15: "But those Sophists who profess to teach the political art appear to be very far indeed from doing so. For in general they do not even know what sort of thing it is or with what sorts of things it is concerned; otherwise they would not have posited it as being the same thing as rhetoric . . . " *Aristotle's* Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

his predecessors as follows. These predecessors all said that the first things, that out of which everything has come, are only bodies. They spoke of soul, but they did not make a fundamental distinction between soul and body. In other words, the souls of which they spoke were in fact bodies. They did not realize the fundamental difference between body and soul, whereas according to Socrates or Plato the soul is not only radically different from the body but prior to the body, higher in rank than the body. Now this view of the relation of body and soul is in a direct connection with the admission or denial of something that is by nature right. If there are only bodies, then it means that man himself can be understood in entirely bodily terms. But the human body is essentially related to the private good of the individual—the food which you need you need for your body; the toothache which you have is exclusively your toothache, and no sympathy with it can make the other man have a toothache—whereas it is only in and through the soul that a common good properly understood is possible. Experiences, as we now say, can be shared in a way in which merely bodily affections cannot be shared, and that is especially true of course of thought, of pure thought.[4] The classic case is, say, a mathematical theorem. Two people study that and understand exactly the same thing. As far as understanding the theorems [is concerned], all differences of the individuals are utterly irrelevant, which you could not say, for example, [5][about] listening to a musical piece, where the individuality would play a role.

What you get from reading the tenth book of the *Laws* is confirmed in a way by what Aristotle says in the tenth book of his *Ethics*, toward the end, about the sophists, the men who prior to Socrates concerned themselves with the study of human things. Aristotle says that the sophists reduced political science to rhetoric, to the art of speaking.[v] We can understand that. If all just things are conventional, only conventional, if there is nothing natural in them, they have no dignity. They have the dignity of any merely conventional thing. For example, if you have a dollar–cents system as distinguished form the pound–shillings system, this is merely conventional and no one takes it seriously except for merely practical use. Now if the just things are merely conventional, this means that the only thing which is by nature good is each man's own private good. That is solid. But the just, that is merely conventional. If, however, the only natural good is each man's own good, then the *polis*, the society, is not good in any way in itself but only in a very subordinate way: it is good for exploitation. It gives the individual opportunities to exploit it which, cleverly used, can be very conducive to his well-being, but there is no preference of the common good before the private good. But what does it mean to exploit the *polis* for one's own good? What do we call the art which enables one to do this on the grandest scale, because little deceptions on tax declarations are too trivial? The art which enables you to do that is exactly the art of rhetoric, whereas even in the case of the false tax declaration, you may after all be found out and will have to go before a court, how can you get an acquittal except if you are a master of the art of rhetoric? That is a slightly satirical presentation, but the principle is this, as Aristotle and Plato have very well seen.

---

[v] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10. 9.18: "But possibly it may seem that political science is unlike the other sciences and faculties. In these the persons who impart a knowledge of the faculty are the same as those who practice it, for instance physicians and painters; but in politics the sophists, who profess to teach the science, never practice it." Loeb Classical Library edition, trans. H. Rackham (1926).

Yet (and now we come to a much more serious and interesting case) Aristotle admitted that there was a kind of political philosophy prior to Socrates. He mentions only one name very clearly, and we have to pay our attention to this man. However insignificant he was in himself, he has a remarkable symbolic significance, otherwise Aristotle would not have devoted to him the central chapter of the second book, i.e., the first book in which Aristotle deals with earlier political thought. The name is Hippodamus, and he can in a technical sense be called the founder of political science or political philosophy. So in a way, we should rise from our seats for one second, but only symbolically. The simplest thing is to read to you the passage from Barker's translation, which is not entirely . . . but is good enough for our purpose. You find this in 1267b22 following. This is chapter 8 in Barker's translation. "Hippodamus the son of Europhon, a citizen of Miletus, was the first man without leading a political life who attempted to handle the theme of the best regime." You see that is Aristotle's definition of a political philosopher. The political philosopher is a man concerned with the best regime without being essentially active in politics, and Hippodamus is the man who fulfills the condition of being the first of this kind.

> He was a man who invented the planning of towns in separate quarters, and laid out the Peiraeus, the harbor of Athens, with regular roads. In his general life, too, he was led into some eccentricity by a desire to attract attention; and this made a number of people feel that he lived in too overdone and artificial a manner. He wore his hair long and expensively adorned: he had flowing robes, expensively decorated, made from a cheap but warm material, which he wore in summer time as well as in winter; and he also aspired to be learned about nature in general.

Now Aristotle ordinarily doesn't do this kind of thing, engage in gossip or nonsense, maybe even in a malicious sense; that is not his manner. Very rarely does Aristotle make a so-called personal comment, and I believe it is no accident that he does this here . . . This ridiculousness in the founder of our science shows some dangers to which the science is exposed. I will not elaborate this now; it will come out very clearly in what Aristotle says. I will mention another example to which Aristotle doesn't refer. The first philosopher is ordinarily said to be Thales. He also made himself ridiculous, but in a different way: looking at the stars, he fell into a ditch.[vi] That also has a symbolic message. A slave–maid from Thrace laughed at him, whereas in Hippodamus, Aristotle laughed at him and not . . .

Let us turn then briefly to Hippodamus's thought. We can say Hippodamus thought the best regime . . . the best regime was according to nature. His scheme is characterized by a beautiful simplicity partly imitated by Plato in the *Republic*. The number three is the key: there are three kinds of laws, three parts of the population. It seems as if this was due to the following fact, that Hippodamus had followed a doctrine of the universe, a cosmology according to which the number three is the key to everything. The best political art, the art according to nature: there are tripartitions in all places. What he did was to make a

[vi] According to the story as told by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, Thales fell into a well, not a ditch. *Theaetetus* 174a.

direct transition from the cosmos as a whole to political things without considering the special nature of man, the special nature of political things. This simple procedure of Hippodamus led, as Aristotle emphasizes, to confusion. He developed a scheme of utmost simplicity, but it led to greater confusion than a less simple regime. Hippodamus failed, we can say, because he did not consider the nature of political things. He did not raise the question "What is?" regarding political things. That assumes that . . . is applicable to everything without taking into consideration the specific character, the "what is," of political things.

Now this kind of question is exactly the kind of question raised by Socrates. We can say that the Socratic revolution in philosophy consists precisely in this fact, that the "what is" of the various kinds of things is the key to [the] understanding of politics. The whole is characterized by noetic heterogeneity, by which I mean this. The whole is not homogeneous, so that a single formula or a series of formulas can suffice to understand all of it. The whole is heterogeneous, but the heterogeneity is not merely sensual but it is of an essentially intellectual, intelligible kind. There are essences, essentially different. And that is of course accepted absolutely by Aristotle. For this reason, that Socrates was the first to be concerned with what is, with the question pointing to the essence, for this reason he must be in the strict sense the founder of political philosophy or political science. He was the first, if I may use this word, to have the conceptual tools for understanding the various kinds of things and therefore also political things as things *sui generis*.

But let us return to Aristotle's remarks about Hippodamus. Hippodamus, apart from giving this overall picture of the *polis*, a picture characterized by amazing simplicity, also made a specific proposal to the effect that inventors should receive honors from the city. Invention should be encouraged by the city. Aristotle's examination of this proposal takes up about half of his whole examination of Hippodamus's scheme, so important is the subject of invention to Aristotle. Now I read to you this passage which throws great light on Aristotle's thinking and I take up especially 1268b22 following.

> In regard to the further question raised by Hippodamus, whether some honour ought not to be conferred on those who suggested an improvement which is of benefit to the city[vii]—we may argue that legislation in such a sense cannot be safely enacted, and has only a specious sound. It might encourage false accusations [of revolutionary plans, Barker adds—LS] against the reformers, and perhaps lead [viii]to political disturbances. But the proposal involves also another problem, and suggests a further argument. There are some thinkers who raise a doubt whether cities lose or gain by changing their traditional laws when some other and better law is possible. If, on this issue, we take the line that change is *not* a gain, it is difficult to agree readily with Hippodamus;[ix] for changes which are really subversive of the laws, or of the regime[x] may be proposed on the plea

[vii] In original: "state"
[viii] In original: "perhaps lead, in this way, to political disturbances."
[ix] In original: "with the proposal made by Hippodamus"
[x] In original: "constitution"

> that they tend to the common good. However, as the issue has now been mentioned, it will be as well to define our views about it a little further. It is, as we have said, an issue which is in debate; and a case can be made for the view that change is the better policy. [That is, generally speaking, a change for the better is the wise one—LS] Certainly in other branches of knowledge change has proved beneficial. We may cite in evidence the changes from traditional practice which have been made in medicine, in bodily[xi] training, and generally in all the arts and forms of human skill; and since politics has to be counted as an art or form of skill, it can be argued[xii] that the same must also be true of politics.

In other words, all arts and sciences have manifestly progressed, says Aristotle. Not only now, but that was seen in the fourth century . . . much more advanced than it was in the time of Homer. Why should not the same be applied to the art of legislation or to the art of politics?

> It can also be argued that the actual facts[xiii] provide an indication [of the benefits of change]. The attractions[xiv] of older times were exceedingly simple and uncivilized; Greeks went about armed [Imagine, what a sign of barbarism, to go around armed; I mean, in Chicago we expect it—LS] and they bought[xv] their brides from each other. [Whereas of course it is the civilized thing to woo. A bride has a right to say no—LS] Indeed the relics of ancient customs which are still in existence, here and there, are utterly absurd: there is, for example,[xvi] a law at Cyme, relating to homicide, that if an accuser can produce a definite number of witnesses from his own kinsmen, the person accused shall be liable to the charge of murder. All men, as a rule, seek to follow [now Aristotle comes to the principle—LS] not the ancestral, but the good.[xvii]

That we can safely say is the most revolutionary statement ever made by a philosopher: not the ancestral, the inherited, but the good. Something inherited may happen to be good; but only if it happens to be good, then it may be preserved. But the inherited as inherited is no longer upheld. Aristotle does not absolutely identify himself . . . but still we have not found earlier an equally strong statement in Greek literature.

> and the earliest known men,[xviii] whether they were ‘earth-born’, or the survivors of some cataclysm, were in all probability similar to ordinary or even foolish people to-day.

[xi] In original: “physical”
[xii] In original: “argued logically”
[xiii] In original: “actual facts [of history]”
[xiv] In original: “usages”
[xv] In original: “and bought”
[xvi] In original: “for instance”
[xvii] *The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 72.
[xviii] In original: “earliest known human beings”

In other words, the ancestors, and ultimately the ancestors of the ancestors, the first men, the first men were not made in perfection . . . the first men were absolutely crude savages, cannibals. How then can these people be the model for us in a progressive civilized society?

> It would therefore be an absurdity to remain constant to their views[xix]. But besides these considerations,[xx] it may also be urged that to leave *written* laws unchanged is not a good policy . . .
>
> But while these arguments go to show that in *some* cases, and at *some* times, law ought to be changed, there is another point of view from which it would appear that change is a matter which needs great caution. When we reflect that the improvement likely to be effected may be small, and that it is a bad thing to accustom men to abrogate laws light-heartedly, it becomes clear that there are some defects, both in legislation and in government, which had better be left untouched. The benefit of change will be less than the loss which is likely to result if men fall into the habit of disobeying the government. We must also take notice that the analogy drawn from the arts is false. To change the practice of an art, meaning to proceed from an inferior medicine to a better medicine, is not the same as to change the operation of a law. It is from habit, and only from habit, he says here, that law derives the validity which secures obedience. But habit can be created only by the passage of time; and a readiness to change from existing to new and different laws will accordingly tend to weaken the general power of law.[xxi]

Now what then does he say here? Let us not forget the context. We are still dealing indirectly with Hippodamus. Hippodamus had a great concern with progress, as we would say, and he had a great concern with simplicity and clarity. There seems to be some connection between his unbridled concern with technological progress. That is at least what we would suspect, who have had such experiences nearer home. But the key point which Aristotle makes is this. There is a radical difference between the arts and law—law in the widest sense, any institution. You can state the difference as follows. Arts are necessarily and reasonably progressive. To progress is of the essence of the arts and sciences. It does not mean they will always do that, but it is unnatural for the arts and sciences not to progress. If this progress does not take place, it means there is something wrong with the practice of the art in a given society. But the opposite is true of laws and institutions. Regarding laws and institutions, the principle is "let sleeping dogs lie" . . . In arts and sciences the opposite is true. What would you say of a scientist who says, "Let sleeping dogs lie"? There is at present complete agreement among scholars regarding this point . . . That is what Aristotle has in mind. Laws, and that is a very grave statement which we have not begun to fathom, laws owe their strength entirely to custom. Entirely to custom means of course the laws do not in any way owe their strength to reason. A new practice in medicine: Why is it readily adopted? Because the inventor can show by

---

[xix] In original: "notions"
[xx] In original: "considerations [which relate to *unwritten* custom]"
[xxi] Barker, 73.

rational argument to fellow medical men that it is more helpful for curing this and this disease. Reason is omnipotent, let us say, in this sphere. Well, even there, there are people whom we call the old guard, who resist innovations even if they are reasonable. But these people have no leg to stand on in science or art, but in law [the old guard do have a case]. Law owes its being as law, its validity as law, its being valid as law—not only on the surface, but observed by the large majority of the people—to custom. And custom is a matter of a long time. And the mere insight that the new regulation is much more practical than the old regulation, if we take Aristotle's view of it, is of no interest as far as legislation is concerned. [That] people must get in the habit of it is a crucial point in all classical political philosophy, at least in Plato's *Laws* and in Aristotle, and we can perhaps state it as follows.

The first task of the political thinker—and I am now not making any distinctions between the philosopher and the thinker—is to find out what is good for political society as such, and for political society circumstanced as this particular society for which we legislate[6]. That is the good. And then we must make a further preparation, which I will express by an impossible mathematical symbolism. The good must be somehow divided by the ancestral to become truly beneficial. If it is not brought into some harmony with the ancestral, if it is not diluted in a way by the ancestral, it will create difficulties. Now the practice of wise statesmen was of course exactly this all the time, but political philosophers, especially in modern times, were more inclined to Hippodamus's line than to the sobriety of Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. A sign, by the way, is the doctrine of sovereignty. What does the doctrine of sovereignty mean? It means that in every society there must be present a power which can change any law at any time. Now there may be some theoretical wisdom in that (I don't go into that) but it is surely not a prudent principle, to be reminded of the presence of such a power which can unmake anything tomorrow which is made today. The . . . statement of this, the sovereign is necessarily the present sovereign. I mean, everyone on a moment's reflection will see that, but that is an important implication which we do not consider. "The sovereign is the present sovereign" means that all custom and everything inherited owes its validity not to being tested or inherited or what have you, but to its being accepted, or not rejected, by the present sovereign. And what is true of the doctrine of sovereignty is true also of the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people in particular. This Hippodamean view—you know now what I mean by Hippodamus; forget about this operation in which you have to divide by the ancestral, and if you know what is politically good, you just make it by virtue of the sovereign power—this reached its external triumph in the French Revolution. As Hegel put it, in the French Revolution man tried to stand on his head, meaning he tried to build up . . . a radically rational society. The previously existing society, the *ancien régime*, was irrational, and by one exercise of the sovereign power of the people, the only legitimate sovereign, a rational order was to be established.

This great and terrifying . . . led, in another country, a man who was not a philosopher but a very profound political thinker to reconsider the whole issue. That was Edmund Burke. It is for this reason that Burke is the most eloquent man after Aristotle to state these principles, which in their mathematical form would be this. Let us see what the two errors are. One error is, let us say, that of doctrinairism, an unqualified reformism. The

alternative would be to say the good is the ancestral, to identify them. That is barbarism, because from this point of view every barbaric system is as good as any other . . . Burke had stated these principles throughout his life, but with the greatest clarity after the French Revolution, and there are many statements one could quote.

I would like to remind you also of another English writer who took up the Burkean point of view about half a century after Burke, when the issue of the French Revolution was not such an obsession as it had become in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The original Whiggish inspiration of Burke could reassert itself more freely than in the writings of the later Burke. This man was Macaulay.[xxii] I find to my surprise all the time that Macaulay is no longer known to students. If for no other reason, he should be read because he is an unusually humorous writer. He is a master of certain English arts of understatement and also of overstatement. I would like to read to you a passage from Macaulay's *History of England* about the Toleration Act.[xxiii]

> Of all the acts that have ever been passed by Parliament, the Toleration Act is perhaps that which most strikingly illustrates the peculiar vices and the peculiar excellences of English legislation . . . The perfect lawgiver is a just temper between the mere man of theory, who can see nothing but general principles, and the mere man of business, who can see nothing but particular circumstances . . . [I]n English legislation the practical element has always predominated, and not seldom unduly predominated . . . over the speculative. To think nothing of symmetry and much of convenience; never to remove an anomaly merely because it is an anomaly; never to innovate except when some grievance is felt; never to innovate except so far as to get rid of the grievance; never to lay down any proposition of wider extent than the particular case for which it is necessary to provide; these are the rules which have, from the age of John to the age of Victoria, generally guided the deliberations of our two hundred and fifty Parliaments. Our national distaste for whatever is abstract in political science amounts undoubtedly to a fault. Yet it is, perhaps, a fault on the right side . . . But, though in other countries there may have occasionally been more rapid progress, it would not be easy to name any other country in which there has been so little retrogression.
>
> The Toleration Act approaches very near to the idea of a great English law. To a jurist, versed in the theory of legislation, but not intimately acquainted with the temper of the sects and parties into which the nation was divided at the time of the Revolution, that Act would seem to be a mere chaos of absurdities and contradictions. It will not bear to be tried by sound general principles. Nay, it will not bear to be tried by any principle, sound or unsound . . .
>
> . . . But these very faults may perhaps appear to be merits, when we take into consideration the passions and prejudices of those for whom the Toleration Act was framed. This law, abounding with contradictions which every smatterer

[xxii] Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), British historian and politician.
[xxiii] The Toleration Act of 1689.

> in political philosophy can detect, did what a law framed by the utmost skill of the greatest masters of political philosophy might have failed to do. That the provisions which have been recapitulated are cumbrous, puerile, inconsistent with each other, inconsistent with the true theory of religious liberty, must be acknowledged. All that can be said in their defense is this: that they removed a vast mass of evil without shocking a vast mass of prejudice . . . [xxiv]

LS: . . . it is a statement of the Aristotelian position mediated by Burke. By the way, there is a contemporary statement, or [one] a bit older than Macaulay, that throws light on this question. That is Hegel's *Critique of the Reform Bill*.[xxv] I don't know whether it is translated into English. It is very remarkable, because Hegel is in the ordinary sense of the term a very conservative man, but he is absolutely shocked at the degree of irrationality of the British order . . . a much clearer order as it was introduced in Europe everywhere after the revolution,[xxvi] even by the counterrevolution of the government. It might be worth it for you to have a look at this statement and contrast it with Macaulay's very neatly phrased position.

To come back to the main point which I make here. In this statement Aristotle says that law, in contradistinction to any arts or sciences, owes its validity exclusively to custom. That means in no way to reason. This is a very hard order, because after all, do we not presuppose that law is some prescription of reason? Although there may be some spheres in which no alternative can be said to be more rational than another, like right-hand driving, for example, but in the main, in all interesting laws, if I may say so, are supposed to be prescriptions of reason. Therefore what Aristotle says here seems to be plainly paradoxical. What does he mean by that? Aristotle says that law is essentially a verdict of reason. Here he says that law gains its validity only by virtue of custom, not by verdict of reason. That is a contradiction. How can he explain that? I will try to sketch a resolution of this difficulty. Let a law be as reasonable as it may be. Its reasonableness becomes obscured through the passions which it restrains. These passions support maxims or opinions incompatible with the law, and these passion-bred opinions in their turn must be counteracted by passion-bred and passion-breeding opposites, opinions which are not necessarily identical with the reasons of the law. In other words, you have to take an overall view and not look at a particular regulation which might not be of any fundamental interest. The law as the most important instrument of the moral education of the many must be supported by ancestral opinions, that is, by myths.

The key passage for that is to be found in the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*, 1074b1 following. Aristotle gives there the example of myth: we speak of the gods as if they were human beings with human shapes. The gods as men in those myths have no meaning, have no being in and by themselves. They have their being only by law, by

---

[xxiv] Macaulay, *History of England From the Accession of James the Second*, vol. 5, chap. 11, "William and Mary" (Philadelphia: The University Library Association, 1898), 98-101.
[xxv] Hegel, "The English Reform Bill," in *Hegel's Political Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 295-330.
[xxvi] It is likely that Strauss is referring to the postrevolutionary Napoleonic state, especially in its Prussian form.

convention. Yet given the necessity of law, one may say that the principle of the whole both wishes and does not wish to be quite true, as Heraclitus said, whom I quoted last time. The city as a whole—that is the deeper reason—is characterized by a specific recalcitrance to reason, and therefore it requires for its well-being a rhetoric different from the ordinary forms of rhetoric as the servant of the political art. This thought is developed at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* at the end of the tenth book, where Aristotle speaks of the rationality of law. He speaks also of the following point.[xxvii] —truly rational man, truly nice man, that was the same for Aristotle for the reasons we discussed last time: the gentleman would not need coercion, and therefore would not need laws. Laws are verdicts of reason, we can say, supplied with coercive power. Both are equally important from Aristotle's point of view. They should be rational, and they must also have coercive power. If they were addressed to simply rational beings, they wouldn't need coercive power. That is, according to the presentation given by Aristotle at the end of the *Ethics,* the defect of the sophists. The sophists say the political art can be reduced to rhetoric, i.e., persuasion is sufficient for governing human beings. That is very strange, and somehow one doesn't quite expect this from Aristotle, but that is his objection to the sophists. Of course they also do not admit any natural right, but the other point which he equally makes is that the sophists are much too sanguine. Persuasion is sufficient only in the case of a relatively small class of human beings. For governing political societies as a whole, coercion is equally necessary, and that means that rhetoric cannot be identical with the political art. The political art embraces, in a way uses, the art of persuasion, but it is only one instrument. Laws are a product of the political art which are not sufficiently supported by any reasoning given in preambles and so on, but which rely decisively on coercion. Yes?

Student: Even in his ideal state, which he mentions in book 7, where man is molded by education, he still keeps the state, so he never considers the state to wither away. [xxviii]

LS: . . . There will always be a minority of all the inhabitants in any given polity that will act rightly without the threat of coercion . . . This minority does not necessarily coincide with a separate social stratum. Aristotle would only say it should . . . but the majority of people will not be rational.[xxix] That is absolutely central for Aristotle, as it is for Plato. The view which you find in modern times, at the margins rather than in the books of the great theoreticians, is that a perfectly rational society is possible, with a society consisting of men each of whom is fully rational. If you have such a society, of course you do not need the state. You can have a stateless society. But the very possibility of this is denied by Plato and Aristotle—and not only by them, but we are now speaking of them. Do you see the point?

Student: . . .

[xxvii] The tape was changed at this point.

[xxviii] The transcriber notes: "Due to mechanical difficulties, only portions of the remainder of this lecture are audible."

[xxix] See Aristotle, *Politics*, book 2, chapters 1-5.

LS: Aristotle also said somewhere in the critique of Plato: You are free to state the conditions for developing your perfect society, the most favorable conditions, but they must be possible. And Aristotle would say that to assume that all men are capable of being fully rational is an impossible demand, incompatible with the nature of man.

Student: . . .

LS: That is true, but I would like you to state the reasons, the connection.

Student: . . .

LS: Then you misunderstood. That is the implication. That could never happen, according to Aristotle, because the majority would not acquire that maturity.

Student: . . .

LS: No, there must be a reason. The mere fact that it has been a certain way hitherto always creates a strong presumption in favor of it. That does not prove it . . . Could there not be one world? One world, and perhaps even one world society without a state . . . a universal society which overcomes all obstacles to human perfection, in which poverty has been overcome: would it not be possible to enable every human being to acquire that perfect moral education, the education of gentlemen, which would make him a mature being who does no longer need coercive laws? A classic premise in Aristotle is that the fundamental situation of man is one of poverty. There would never be enough goods around to supply the majority of men with . . . the goods. But this argument can be defeated by the enormous increase in productivity which has taken place in modern times and which is still progressing today. [Whether] the average human being, taking all things into consideration, is now better off than he was a thousand years ago is difficult to answer.

Student: . . .

LS: . . . if all persons were mature, they would apply the right kind and degree of coercion . . . unless you take the view taken by some of Rousseau's followers, that any use of coercion in the education of young children is ruinous to their moral character . . . forbidding accustoms to the idea of authority and then the idea of inequality . . . He develops that great vice of pride, being on the top, of lording it over everyone, and that is the root of all difficulties according to Rousseau . . . pain from the fire doesn't create any resentment. But if you tell him, "Don't do it," then he has resentment because you prevented him from something. This resentment leads then by a simple psychological mechanism that he wants to do the forbidding, that he wants to be the one who creates the resentment, he wants to be the lord and master. Progressive education has continued this line of reasoning in our own time . . . The completely enlightened, universal society without coercion in which education would follow the Rousseauan model. I believe there is some logic in that. But the problem is there, and one must face that. Take another example. All political philosophies up to now [have] said

that man needs political society, a political society which rests on exclusion. Every political society has human beings outside its borders. This remains true if there are only two political societies left. But one global political society would be a radical change in political life for which there is no precedent whatever, and which is more radical than . . . That is another way of putting it. But as soon as you have two societies and, *a fortiori*, more, the problem of defense arises and, in plain English, the problem of war, because the possibility of war cannot be understood except in the light of what war is, and not only might be.

Student: . . .

LS: . . . law is rational, the verdict of reason, i.e., the law establishes what is good, what is good in this respect for this society . . . Aristotle says this won't work, quite. It must also be in conformity with the opinions, the prejudices, the traditional notions, of the community in question, its custom. The statement "law is only the custom" is incomplete, and the statement "law is only the verdict of reason" is also incomplete.

Student: . . .

LS: [. . .][xxx] It seems to me that this point, the coercive character of law, the hard character of law, is an absolutely crucial point in the classical political doctrine. This point has been obscured not only in certain half-anarchistic doctrines, but there is also a very different statement of this point which is characteristic of the Thomistic tradition. In the book by Yves Simon, *Theory of Democratic Government*,[xxxi] one of the most solidly reasoned and thoughtful books to appear in the last ten or twenty years (it came out of the Chicago Press about ten years ago), Simon argues very strongly that even among a group of perfectly rational, morally mature people, who would not need any coercion in order to act decently, law would still be needed. Here the element of coercion is regarded as only accidentally needed for law, not belonging to its essence . . . modern thinkers like Hobbes who are known and are even notorious for their hardness. On this point there is no difference between them and Plato and Aristotle.

Student: . . .

LS: . . . the distinction between nature and convention which is no longer intelligible . . . every act, every event is fully determined. Every act is as necessary as every other one. Now this makes impossible the distinction between nature and convention, because the basic acts which have been laid down [7][are] as explicable in terms of [8][their] causes [9]as the direction or the fall of a comet of anything else. You may not be able to do it in a particular case, but the principle is clear. That there are events in the world that are not meaningfully explicable, that is common to chance events only

---

[xxx] The transcriber notes that "several minutes of Professor Strauss's answer to this question are inaudible."

[xxxi] Yves R. Simon (1903-1961), *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures) (Chicago: University of Chicago Pres, 1951). The book was later reprinted by the University of Notre Dame Press.

through convention. It doesn't mean that convention means chance . . . Chance and *nomos* have this in common, that they are events beyond which we can no longer meaningfully go in examining them. I would like to illustrate this because now, very interestingly, this old notion of *nomos* becomes again intelligible in certain quarters of social science. My only example is good because it is a famous writer; it is taken from Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, which you probably all know because it was required reading in the Chicago College for many years, and I suppose also in other places. She is an anthropologist, as you probably know, and she was studying these tribes—in her case I believe it was North American Indian tribes. She tried to explain the laws, manners, habits in terms of climate, flora and fauna, race, and what have you. It was impossible. She found two tribes in identically the same climate . . . yet the one tribe was in favor of toughness and the other was in favor of gentleness. How come? Her solution was: the value system A was adopted by tribe A, and value system B was adopted by tribe B. There was no necessity for tribe A to adopt value system A and for tribe B to adopt system B: it was an inexplicable act, an act of freedom. That she doesn't say, but that is what it amounts to, if you think about it. No attempt to explain why tribe A has adopted value system A is possible; you ultimately come back to the mere pure brute fact of adoption. That is what these old fellows meant. That is what *nomos* meant. It is no longer explicable. But this chance event here is not explicable beyond the fact that we know it is a chance event . . .

Student: . . .

LS: . . . By the way the distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental laws, while it is of very great practical importance, is not of very great theoretical use . . . Laws regarding marriage are of tremendous importance for a society as a whole, and not necessarily linked up with the variety of regimes . . .

Student: . . .

LS: . . . Among the laws you can distinguish those that are directly related to the preservation of civil peace and the character of the regime. Such laws as the electoral laws: Who has the vote and for what? That is a law more directly related to the regime than, say, marriage laws. If you want to, you can say these are the fundamental laws of the regime, but Aristotle simply doesn't say that. You can say that, but there is no necessity for doing so.

Student: . . .

LS: . . . In other words, you say there can be a considerable degree of lawlessness in spite of political stability, is that it?

Student: . . .

---

[1] Deleted "in the Laws"
[2] Deleted "precedent"

[3] Deleted “he”
[4] Deleted “and”
[5] Deleted “from”
[6] Moved “is”
[7] Deleted “is”
[8] Deleted “its”
[9] Deleted “as well”

Session 16: 27 November 1961[i]

Leo Strauss: [1]Now before I continue,[ii] there are two questions. Mr. ____ is still unclear about Aristotle's conceptions of human perfectibility.

> Does Aristotle's observation that the power of acting at will leaves no defense against evil impulses present in all of us mean that because of innate human flaws or men's mere humanness we can never become or be perfectly good? Is the idea of the good man and hence the good society a goal toward which all men should aim and a few men may approximate, but which no man can ever truly reach . . . where absolute freedom is allowed, there is nothing to restrain the evil which is inherent in every man.

Well, Aristotle of course admitted the possibility of good men, and if any further proof were needed, it would be supplied by the chapter in the *Ethics* toward the end of the fourth book, where he speaks of a sense of shame as a desirable quality in immature human beings. That means not only young people who are immature, but also old people who are immature. A mature man, that is the implication, would do nothing wrong; hence, there would be nothing to be ashamed of. And for this reason, a sense of shame is not a virtue, it is only something (behind?)[iii] virtue and vice, because it is a corrective of vice. So Aristotle admits the [possibility of the good] man. Now what does this statement mean, the evil impulse is present in all of us? Of course they are [in us], and what kind of things are going on in our subconscious, as some man has called it, is supposed to be common knowledge today. That is clear. All kinds of fantastic things are desired by any one of us under certain conditions, for example in dreams. Now if the social order is of such a kind as to encourage these kind of things, encourage all lawless desires, and if there are special opportunities to indulge them, for example, excessive wealth, very great power, no good. Aristotle is sure that a truly good man would resist all temptations, but you cannot count [on it] that all powerholders will be perfectly good men. Any political science, any legislative science has to reckon with that. I see no difficulty in that. To say that man is capable of being good, virtuous, and yet such men are very rare under all conditions and are particularly rare in a society which does not have effective restraints on lawless desires, I see no difficulty there.

Student: I wonder if the habitually good man still has a residual problem of evil.

LS: No, the truly good man, no; he would have them habitually under control.[iv] But let us assume that certain very wicked people put some pills into his drink, pills which dope him so that he does no longer know what he does, so that he is no longer responsible.

---

[i] See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 13-29.

[ii] Strauss began the session by presenting the details of the final exam. This announcement has been deleted.

[iii] The parenthetical word appears in the original transcript, evidently the transcriber's guess as to what Strauss said.

[iv] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 10, chapter 9.

[2][The evil impulses] might conceivably come out. That would not be fantastic; things like that do happen. You read of these things even in the daily papers. Aristotle has no doubt. Plato would say that strictly speaking no man is good because no man is wise, and for Plato goodness and wisdom are identical. Aristotle doesn't say that, but I will take up these two points later on.

Now the statement by Mr. _____.

> Aristotle describes the hierarchy of ends according to the nature of the most complete and best man, who is a wise man. Why is the wise man more naturally complete than a man characterized by a different virtue, such as prudence or courage? Is not the possession of wisdom a particular virtue which completes the nature of the wise man, just as prudence completes the prudent man?

That is a perfectly sensible question, but Aristotle assumes you can say (I will take up this problem later today) that the perfection of the highest in man is the highest virtue. Now if the highest in man is the mind, and the mind is most truly mind in its theoretical capacity, then theoretical wisdom is superior to prudence. In prudence we deal essentially with the contingent things, the things which come into being and perish, and from our point of view even what is good for me, the circumstances in which I am here now. Wisdom deals with what is always, the sempiternal or eternal. Aristotle had reasoned that out. Whether his reasoning is good enough, that is another matter, but it is not a mere dogmatic assertion. And as for courage in particular, there is an argument as to that in the third book of the *Ethics*. Aristotle begins his enumeration of the virtues with courage, and that means in the context that courage is the lowest of the virtues. That doesn't mean it is not indispensable, but it is the lowest because it is much more—I will give you only an indication of that. When Aristotle speaks of courage he has to make a distinction between five forms of courage. Courage is complicated; there is a certain form of courage which any thug has, and that is not exactly the right thing. And there are[3] [fewer] of these spurious forms in the case of the other virtues, as appears from Aristotle's . . . in the other cases. Courage is from Aristotle point of view the lowest of the virtues. By the way, Plato says the same thing in the first book of the *Laws*.[v] This does not mean that it is not necessary and indispensable, but it is, so to speak, the least intellectual of the virtues. Second question: "If only the wise man is complete, because wisdom, in contrast to the other virtues"—that is not Aristotle's view—"is Aristotle's view of the best man . . . in conflict with the other virtues?" Not in principle.

Let us then turn to the conclusion of my argument last time. I have been speaking of Aristotle's presentation and critique of the first political philosophy, at least of the man who according to Aristotle's notion of political philosophy would be the first political philosopher, namely, Hippodamus . . . the neglect to consider the political things in their peculiar character. He applies a cosmological formula to the political things. A modern equivalent would be the people in the nineteenth century and some in our century who said evolution is the key to the analysis of political phenomena—in a way also psychoanalysis today, although psychoanalysis is of course not a cosmological but only a

---

[v] *Laws* 630c-d.

psychological formula, and some people say we do not understand political things unless we view them in the light of psychoanalysis. That would be also a parallel. Aristotle speaks in this context very properly, because Hippodamus has not considered it, of the specific character of laws and makes here a rather surprising statement. The laws owe their power entirely to custom or habituation, and this is the radical difference between laws and the arts. The arts owe their validity to their reasonableness. If a physician makes a new discovery, the claim of this discovery to acceptance is based entirely on its reasonableness, nothing else. And if it is based on something else, say, on the power of that physician in the medical hierarchy, then it is very dubious form the medical point of view. But the case of laws is different, according to Aristotle. As he says here, the laws owe their power entirely to custom and not to their intrinsic reasonableness. Now if one elaborates this point, one reaches this conclusion: that the political community, the *polis*, is essentially recalcitrant to reason. It needs sheer force in addition to persuasion. This is a very strange assertion of Aristotle, because he is the same man who said that the law is the dictate of reason, that the rule of law means the rule of reason as distinguished from the rule of men, which means the rule of reason qualified by passion.

I would like to restate the difficulty. In the critique of Hippodamus, it seems that the arts are superior to the laws. The arts are of higher rationality. But precisely Aristotle's critique of Hippodamus implies that the arts must be controlled by law. The key point which Aristotle makes there [is that] Hippodamus recommends the encouragement of invention, i.e., of what the arts are by nature inclined to do, to progress; [and] Aristotle says no, this unqualified invention is politically and socially harmful and it must be controlled by the laws. Hence the arts must be subordinate to the law, whereas the first part of the argument seemed to suggest that the laws are superior to art. Now let us discuss this point. Laws are the work of the legislative art, but the legislative art is the highest form of practical wisdom or prudence, namely, the prudence concerned with the common good of a political society as distinguished from prudence in the primary sense which is concerned with a man's own good. These things are developed by Aristotle in book six of the *Ethics* especially. The difference between art and law, between the intellectual activities proper and law and social institutions, is founded on the difference between art and prudence, and this we have to discuss now.

Prudence is of higher dignity than the arts because every art is concerned with a partial good, whereas prudence is concerned with the whole human good, the good life. Prudence alone enables one to distinguish between genuine arts and sham arts. The arts do not do it, but prudence does. A genuine art like medicine, a sham art like cosmetics, and prudence alone enables one to discern which use of an art is good. For example, take the art of strategy. But not every use of the art of strategy, every technically correct use of the art of strategy is good. That is no longer decided by strategy, by the general as general, but by the civilian authorities, as we would say, and that means by prudence as distinguished from the mere art. The arts point, as it were, to right or to law, which makes them genuine arts by being their limit and norm. This is the obvious message of the famous choral song in Sophocles's *Antigone*, many (awful ?)[vi] things there are, but the most (awful) is man, and the poet gives a description of the various arts which man has

[vi] Presumably the transcriber's guess as to what Strauss said.

invented in order to lead up to this.[vii] It can be a very great thing, but it can be a very dangerous thing because the arts can both be well-used and misused. And what is good use in contradistinction to bad use is determined no longer by the arts but by justice or by right, or, which is the same thing, by prudence. The artisan is concerned with producing the work peculiar to his art, the cobbler with making shoes, the physician with restoring health, but as such he is not concerned with his own good. The cobbler is not concerned with his own good in making shoes; he is concerned with his own good insofar as he is concerned with receiving pay for his work or with practicing the art of moneymaking, an art which accompanies all arts, because every artisan accepts reward for what he does. [4]At first glance the art of moneymaking would appear to be the universal art or the art of arts. The art of moneymaking knows no limits. It enables a man to make greater and ever greater gain. Yet the view that cleverness in moneymaking is an art presupposes that unlimited acquisitiveness is good for man, and this presupposition can very well be questioned. It appears according to Aristotle's analysis that acquisition is for the sake of the use of wealth, for the sake of good use of wealth, and this acquisitive activity is necessarily regulated by prudence. Even if there can be an art of moneymaking, and in the loose sense of the word art, [as there] surely can be, this itself must be regulated by a higher form of reason, which again is not an art but prudence.

The distinction between prudence and art implies that there is no art that tells one which partial good supplied by an art I ought to choose here and now in preference to other particular goods. The artisans may be perfect in supplying us with the products of their different arts, but no art can tell us which product I should acquire or buy now in preference to others. That is the implication of this distinction. There is no expert who can decide the prudent man's vital questions for him as well as he can. This is one massive difference between Aristotle and certain trends in present-day social science, according to which view it is possible to replace prudence ultimately by an art, by an expert. You have today, for example, an expert in marrying: marriage counselors, people who in a way claim to be better able to tell a man who he should marry than he could himself. The notion of prudence implies that the prudent man alone can settle his vital questions—[though] not every man; there are people who are well served by having expert advice. You see, the expert advice can never be final. A medical expert would tell you: You must undergo an operation, and if you do not undergo it you will die. That would seem to be identical with a command, but it is not. You can still say what you prefer; the decision is your decision. No one therefore can be compelled to undergo an operation if he does not think it is necessary for him. The physician says it is necessary if you want to survive, but the sick man can still say it is better not to live than to have perhaps an extreme incapacitation. It might even conceivably be the cost of the operation [that influences his decision]. To be prudent means to lead a good life, and to lead a good life means that one deserves to be one's own master or that one makes one's own decisions well.

The notion of prudence is incompatible with the notion of universal expertise. Prudence is that kind of knowledge which is inseparable from moral virtue, that is to say, goodness of character or of the habit of choosing, just as moral virtue is inseparable from prudence.

[vii] Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 368 ff.

Aristotle makes a distinction between prudence and cleverness or smartness. Smartness or cleverness is not prudence. Smartness or cleverness is the ability to find means for any ends; whether the end or the means are decent or indecent doesn't make any difference. That is smartness, and that is not prudence. Prudence is constituted by the copresence in the same individual of decency, and vice versa. You cannot be morally good if you are not prudent. Otherwise you have good intentions, but that doesn't make you a good man. You must also choose properly here and now. It is not enough to have a general desire for acting well if you do not choose well here and now. The arts as arts do not have this close relation to moral virtue. In other words, you can be an artisan without having any moral virtue to speak of; you can be a scientist without any moral virtue to speak of. Aristotle goes so far in the *Politics* as to suggest that the virtue required of artisans as artisans is less than the one required of slaves, because a slave lives with you in your house. If he is to be a good slave, he must be, if I may say so, housebroken: he must have quite a few moral qualities. But the artisan, who lives elsewhere and with whom you have to do only when you enter his shop over the counter, he can be an habitual drunkard and what[ever] else, provided he just has enough self-control to be good while producing—and preferably also while exchanging, because there are also possibilities of deception there. But here you don't have to worry too much because these things are somehow guaranteed by legislation and so on. Prudence and moral virtue united and as it were fused enable a man to lead a good life or a noble life, which seems to be the natural end of man.

The best life is the life devoted to understanding or contemplation as distinguished from the practical or political life. Therefore practical wisdom is lower in rank than theoretical wisdom, which is concerned with the divine things, as Aristotle puts it, or the cosmos, and subservient to it but in such a way that within its sphere, the sphere of all human things as such, prudence is supreme. The sphere ruled by prudence is closed,[5] since the principles of prudence, namely, the ends in the light of which prudence guides man, are known independently of theoretical[6] [reason].[viii] We know by nature the ends of man, we don't need a science for that. Because Aristotle held that art is inferior to prudence, that prudence is inferior to theoretical wisdom, and that theoretical wisdom is available, he could found political science as an independent discipline among a number of disciplines in such a way, however, that political science preserves the perspective of the citizen or the statesman and is not dependent on theoretical science. Political science, the science of human things, is an independent discipline because its first principles do not need a higher science for their establishment. Is this point clear? If we look today at political science and social science as ordinarily conceived, political science is essentially dependent on other sciences preceding political science, as people say, logically. For example, political science deals with a certain kind of human actions, political actions. But there is a general science of human action that is called psychology, and therefore psychology precedes political science logically and political science is based on psychology. Aristotle asserts fundamentally the independence of political science because the highest principles of political science are not established or are not necessarily established by a preceding science.

[viii] See *City and Man*, 25.

Student: How are they established? Are they simply induced from experience, from a higher kind of experience?

LS: Let us look at it this way. You know the sharp distinction which has become powerful since the times of German idealism between the *a priori* and the empirical is not noticeable when one reads Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*.

Student: They are empirical, aren't they?

LS: They are empirical, but on the other hand the old objection of Kant, for example, against empirical knowledge: that it can only lead to provisional knowledge. And experience can show you only that things have been such and such hitherto; it cannot tell you anything about the necessity, hence about the future. But this argument makes no impression on Aristotle, and one would have to understand that.

Student: Well, he says in the *Ethics* that one can't expect anything beyond a certain degree of precision, but I noticed in the *Politics* he refers to political science as specifically a science.

LS: I know that, but you must not push this too hard. The word "science" is used by Aristotle frequently synonymously with art. In other words, the sharp distinction made in book 6 does not apply everywhere to his own usage. But nevertheless there is something in what you say. Although your argument was not good, the point you made was good. There is a different degree of "scientificality" about the *Politics* than about the *Ethics*. I will begin to take this up later, because that was only a provisional statement which I think is of some importance. For that is what Aristotle at first glance says and in a way what he always means, but not unqualifiedly, as I will say. Yes?

Student: In what sense is the *Politics*, or for that matter the *Ethics*, independent of theoretical science insofar as both of them have as their ground already an investigative nature?

LS: When I began this course with an assertion which I repeated until the point of boring you, the connection between Aristotle and common sense, I had this in mind. Surely certain things, certain points, theoretical points which occur in his other works, in his *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, etc., are referred to here and there in the *Ethics*, but they are rather marginal. You can understand the main argument without it. The first point is this, one very commonsensical thing which Aristotle makes use of practically all the time. He makes a certain assertion; for example, he enumerates these and these virtues not deduced from any principle. The six regimes, you will recall, he deduces from a principle. There is a schema: one, few, all; good and bad. And you get six, and only six, necessarily. But in the case of the virtues it is different. What is the thought behind it? I would follow the principle of uncontested experience, a principle on which we act all the time. Every child in school would say that a child is either a boy or a girl. He or she may not have the slightest notion of what the bisexuality of man means, that it is connected with the procreation of human beings and so on, but that he knows, and we act on that all the time.

[7]Ultimately, when you look at any very interesting development anywhere in science, you will see that an uncontested experience is suddenly confronted with an exception, and the question is: Is this exception important enough to abandon the previously established categories, or can it find its place among them? So uncontested experience supplies us with universals which we need, and Aristotle would say that if someone finds fault with his list of virtues [and] he would say: "This is not a virtue; for example, urbanity, it is not a virtue." And then if he is a very brutish and boorish fellow, he would say: "No, one should tell everyone on all occasions what one thinks of them." And then one would perhaps need some education, some moral education, perhaps first some crude examples where he finds that he gets into trouble with this kind of boorishness, which might make him think for a moment and later on he will see it is not only imprudent but it is even not nice, not decent. Then he will know that urbanity is a virtue. And in other cases, our example would say, "This and this is a virtue"—for example, beneficence. It is not a virtue in Aristotle. And you must argue it out: Did Aristotle perhaps include it somewhere? And if one cannot find it included anywhere, you have to look up all passages where Aristotle speaks of beneficence casually and see if you do not get an argument indirectly proving beneficence is not a virtue. That, by the way, was I think Aristotle's opinion.

Student: Could it not be argued that Aristotle's list might have been otherwise?

LS: As a distinguished lawyer says, we must . . . quite often. Prior to investigation it is possible that Aristotle empirically picked up some of the virtues without considering completeness. In a way, that was Kant's objection to Aristotle's doctrine of categories: he says he picked them up rhapsodically instead of deducing them. And all people who have gone through that German idealistic school—and that means today everyone, even the positivists—are of course shocked by the unprincipled character of argument in Aristotle and even in Plato, because the empirical and the so-called *a priori* are not distinguished in any way. That is the peculiarly "commonsensical" character of classical thought.

Student: . . .

LS: The good man in the practically and politically important sense is the gentleman, not the wise man.

Student: What is the relationship of Aristotelian common sense to Aristotelian wisdom and also the idea of prudence?

LS: Common sense is of course an un-Aristotelian term, i.e., the term common sense occurs in Aristotle's psychology but has an entirely different meaning. It has nothing to do with what we now call common sense. What we call common sense apparently emerged in the eighteenth century.[ix] [8][But the term as we use it may go] back to Cicero, as far as I know. I have not investigated that. And it is indeed originally some minor

[ix] More precisely, it originated in the work of the school of the so-called Scottish "common sense" thinkers. This school had its roots in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and included Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid, and William Hamilton.

modification of what Aristotle meant by prudence, i.e., common sense is a common moral sense, or something like that. Then we have disposed of one half of your question. What is the relation of common sense and wisdom? Wisdom has to do with the unchangeable, in modern language; for example, laws, universal laws, would be such an example. Prudence has to do always with this individual here and now. To show the connection in the simplest sense, in the case of the man of wisdom, the man of wisdom is concerned with theory, with contemplation. But this same man is of course Mr. Miller or whatever his name may be, living, say, in Detroit, born then and then, married or unmarried, and so on—i.e., he is in addition also a human being who has other preoccupations, professions other than theoretical wisdom. But in his case all the other qualities would be in the service of theoretical wisdom. He must reflect: How can I get the maximum of leisure for research? These reflections about how to get the maximum of leisure, that belongs to the sphere of prudence because that changes from man to man, from situation to situation. For example, if he is a professor at Stanford and has an opportunity to become a professor at Berkeley, for example, that is a purely prudential question. But the question concerning the relation of liberal democracy to communism as such is a theoretical question. That is a provisional statement. Does it make sense? And prudence in the primary sense is the individual's concern with his good life, but there is also a prudence which has to do with the good life of society, and that is called statesmanship. Statesmanship is a modification of prudence. And Aristotelian political science is not statesmanship, but it is meant for the guidance of statesmen. It is not meant for theoretical use, for understanding for its own sake.

Student: Would statesmanship or political science use the word *techne*?

LS: That is a great question. I will come to that later. For the time being I will leave it at this tripartition, otherwise my argument will not become clear. *Techne,* the arts, all of them: prudence which implies . . . statesmanship; and theoretical wisdom, meaning all the sciences as sciences. Whether one can leave it at that or not, that is a question which I will discuss in the sequel.

Student: Isn't the notion of human excellence dependent upon a theoretical understanding of physics, or that everything works for an end—

LS: Not according to Aristotle. The Aristotelian statements, when you read the beginning of the *Ethics*—we know everyone agrees as to what the end of man is: happiness. Sure there are differences: some people say that happiness consists in having the maximum of sensual pleasure, and others think happiness consists in glory and honor, and others say happiness consists in decency, others say in theoretical wisdom. And then Aristotle argues that out without much theoretical wisdom involved in that, [based] on what gentlemen admit. A gentleman wouldn't say we live for the sake of filling our belly, and he would not say merely for the sake of glory and honor, because he knows that in many cases it is much more decent to be one in rank, as a soldier or whatever it may be, and in no way distinguished, and to be simply a good citizen than to be of high standing. He would say justice, good citizenship in the highest sense, that is the most important thing. One more and then we go on.

Student: I have always felt that the ancient writings on the soul were helpful for political science, and I don't think you disagree with that.

LS: Which do you mean by that? Give an example.

Student: *De Anima*.

LS: Which particular passage do you think is very helpful for political science?

Student: Book 3, on the intellect.

LS: I own I don't see that. If you had said the parts on psychology dealing with the passions are very important for political science, I would have said yes; therefore Aristotle dealt with the passions in his *Rhetoric*.

Student: How about where he says that reason follows inclination in *De Anima*?

LS: You mean the relation between inclination and reason? But how far is this of direct importance to political science, and even to ethics?

Student: It seems to me that the whole notion of natural virtue being prior to prudence depends on the fact—

LS: But what is the teaching of the *Ethics* regarding that? First you must be habituated, and until you truly understand it is "do" or "don't," or "a good child doesn't do that." Why a good child doesn't do that, he doesn't know. Gradually, when he becomes older he will see that. I know that there are some links, of course, even a very important hidden link between the practical, moral, political writings of Aristotle and the theoretical writings, but primarily the practical and political writings stand on their own feet.

Student: Isn't it a critical link, the question of whether or not reason in itself is obligatory in practical reason? And Aristotle says it's not.

LS: What do you mean, obligatory?

Student: That knowledge of things good will immediately, necessarily—

LS: I believe I will take up the issue which you have in mind. But on the surface it is simply this, as Aristotle says: prudence consists in knowing how and when and toward whom to do or not to do. For example, to give money to whom, and when and how much you should give, that is determined by prudence, i.e., you have to know all the circumstances to have a right decision, a practical right decision. But there are certain things where the question simply doesn't arise: for example, when to steal and from whom and under what circumstances, because you mustn't steal under any circumstances. That's all the *Ethics* says about it. That is enough for practical purposes.

That it doesn't solve all questions, Aristotle knew; but that is marginal, but not unimportant for these reasons if it is practically marginal.

Now let me continue. According to Aristotle it is moral virtue which supplies the sound principles of actions, the just and noble ends as actually desired, i.e., moral virtue doesn't merely tell you that, say, temperance is good; it makes you desire temperance, to desire to live temperately. These ends come to sight only to the morally good man. Prudence seeks the means for these ends. The morally good man is the properly bred man, the well bred man. Aristotle's political science is addressed only to such men. Aristotle refuses to teach crooks how to be successful crooks. He speaks to gentlemen: how they can be most gentlemanly in the greatest variety of circumstances. The sphere of prudence is then closed by principles which are fully evident only to gentlemen. In seeking for higher principles, i.e., you see the circularity of the argument: a gentleman is what gentlemen believe to be a gentleman, and therefore one could say, "This is theoretically unsatisfactory. I want to deduce gentlemanship, virtues, from a higher principle." Now in seeking for higher principles, one would raise the question: Why should one be decent? That is a simple question of principle, but in doing so one has already ceased to be a gentleman. A gentleman is defined by this circularity. Decency is meant to be choiceworthy for its own sake, and therefore the question why gentlemanship or why moral virtue cannot be raised. Aristotle is very true to the phenomena. A gentleman is recognized as gentleman, however, not only by other gentlemen but also by people of deficient breeding. Yet among the latter there may be men of great power of persuasion who question the goodness of moral virtue—in other words, who say "Why should I be decent?"—who have the indecency to raise this question. It is therefore not sufficient to know what justice, magnanimity, and the other virtues are and to be moved by the beauty of these virtues. One must show that they are good. That is the crux of the *Ethics*. One must then transcend the sphere of prudence or of what one may call the moral consciousness.

The only thinker of the great thinkers who has drawn all the conclusions of the absoluteness of the moral consciousness was Kant, but Kant had for this purpose to write his *Critique of Pure Reason*, i.e., to show the essential limitations of all theoretical knowledge before he could make this statement. One must show that the practice of moral virtue is the end of man by nature, i.e., that man is inclined toward the practice of moral virtue by nature. This doesn't require that man know by nature, i.e., without any effort on his part, the natural end. The natural end of man, as well as of any other natural being, becomes genuinely known by theoretical science. This appears then by the science of the natures, of which the nature of man is one. More precisely, knowledge of the virtues derives from knowledge of the human soul. Each part of the soul has its specific perfection. Now Plato sketches such a purely theoretical account of the virtues, especially in the *Republic*. The soul is divided into three parts: reason, spiritedness, desire. There is a virtue of reason, a virtue of spiritedness, a virtue of desire, and then you need also a fourth one to bind them together and make them one virtue. That is what Plato does, a deduction. Aristotle does nothing of the sort. Yes?

Student: I was just trying to figure out how this differs from what I asked.

LS: I said more than once that what I said in the first part of the argument is only half of it. I may not have expressed it in my reply to you clearly, but I said it at least twice. The question is surely legitimate, but you must also understand the power of this first part of the argument. Aristotle does not even attempt to give such an account of the virtues. He describes all the moral virtues as they are known to morally virtuous men without trying to deduce them from a higher principle. Generally speaking, we may say that he leaves it at the fact that a given habit is regarded as praiseworthy without investigating why this is so. One may say that Aristotle remains within the limits of an unwritten law, an unwritten *nomos* which is recognized by well-bred people everywhere. This unwritten law may be in agreement with reason, but is not as such dictated by reason. It constitutes a sphere of the human or political things by being its limit or its ceiling. If Aristotle had proceeded differently he would have made political or practical science simply dependent on theoretical science, and that precisely he did not wish to do.

Now in order to grasp Aristotle's teaching, one must start from the fact that according to him the highest end of man by nature is theoretical understanding or philosophy and that this perfection does not require moral virtue as moral virtue, meaning the just and noble deeds as choiceworthy for their own sake. That is morality. In other words, Aristotle makes it perfectly clear that you cannot think if you do not have control over your passions, but the control over the passions is from this point of view [a] mere means, without merit in itself. Nietzsche in a way completely misunderstood Aristotle and Plato and came in a roundabout way through his own difficulties to an understanding of this point. He said that for the philosopher a certain asceticism, a certain abstention is not meritorious but has the same dignity, the same character, as a similar abstention on the part of a jockey.[x] He wants to win a race, and he knows that if he wants to win it he must be very careful in dieting. In other words, it is nothing to boast of, nothing resplendent. It goes without saying that man's highest end cannot be achieved without actions resembling moral actions proper. But the actions in question are intended by the philosopher as mere means to this end. That end also calls for prudence, for the philosopher must deliberate about how he can secure the conditions for his philosophizing. The moral virtues are more directly related to man's second natural end, his social life or political life. One could therefore think that the moral virtues are intelligible as being essentially in the service of the city. The city cannot be properly [a city] if people are not courageous, temperate, just, and so on; in other words, the utilitarian justification arises.

I hope you understood the first point. Something like the moral virtues are needed by the theoretical perfection of man, but they are not needed as moral virtues. For instance, magnanimity is praiseworthy because the city needs men who are born to command and who know that they are born to command. According to some report, Field Marshal Montgomery[xi] is the most famous contemporary example of this virtue. But it suffices to

[x] See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 3. 8.

[xi] Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery (1887-1976), British general, famous for his World War II actions. He served as commander of the Eighth Army when they defeated the Germans

read Aristotle's description of magnanimity in order to see that the full phenomenon of magnanimity cannot be understood in that way, from this utilitarian point of view. What Aristotle ascribes to the various virtues is a splendor which cannot be accounted for by the utilitarian doctrine. The moral virtues cannot be understood as being for the sake of the city, since the city must be understood for the sake of the practice of moral virtue. And the argument can be beautifully supported by proving that if you turn it around, you are Machiavellian. The indirect proof of the soundness of Aristotle's view is Machiavelli, because that is exactly what Machiavelli said: the moral virtues are understandable only as means for [the ends of] the city. And all the terrible consequences of Machiavelli follow[9] [from that]. If the moral virtues are means for the ends of the city, it is by no means certain that they are always means. There will be always interesting marginal cases, and especially at one point: What about a condition in which the city is in peril, or it doesn't exist? It has to be founded. There the moral virtues would not apply. The moral virtues come into play only after the city has been established, after the world has been made safe for moral virtue; but before it has been made safe, anything will do. That is Machiavelli's, and I think an absolutely legitimate, conclusion. Aristotle saw that, and therefore in this suggests, as Plato did, that the city is for the sake of virtue—Aristotle more clearly than Plato, as we will see in the sequel. Moral virtue is then not intelligible as a means for the only two natural ends which could be thought to be the ends of moral virtue, the intellectual life and the social life. Therefore it seems moral virtue must be regarded as an absolute, an absolute in a precise sense as something which cannot be reduced to anything else.

Yet one cannot disregard the relations of moral virtues to those two natural ends, namely, wisdom and the *polis*. Moral virtue shows that the city—and that is the key point, moral virtue, which cannot be understood as mere means of the *polis*, because the *polis* must be understood as in the service of moral virtue—moral virtue shows that the city points beyond itself, because the city is for the sake of[xii] [. . .] —activity is only in the service of noble use of leisure. But the gentleman's leisurely use of activity hardly goes beyond the enjoyment of poetry listening, or culture, or however it may be. In other words, that cannot possibly be the end of man. Aristotle is the founder of political science for this precise reason, because he is the discoverer of moral virtue. This simple fact cannot be emphasized too strongly. The term moral virtue occurs for the first time in Aristotle. Plato doesn't have the term. Of course, after the term had come into being, it is easy to recognize something like moral virtue all over the world, but the precise meaning which it has it has only in Aristotle. For Plato, what Aristotle calls moral virtue is a kind of halfway house between what Plato calls political or vulgar virtue and genuine virtue. Political or vulgar virtue is in the service of bodily well-being, say of self-preservation or peace. Genuine virtue is the same as philosophy for Plato. As for the Stoics, who are frequently mentioned in this context—you know this is a post-Aristotelian school, the

---

and Italians at the Battle of El Alamein, and in Sicily; he commanded the Allied troops in France during and after the Normandy landings.

[xii] The tape was changed at this point. In *The City and Man*, Strauss writes: "Moral virtue shows that the city points beyond itself but it does not reveal clearly that toward which it points, namely, the life devoted to philosophy" (27). Strauss then goes on to discuss "noble leisure," just as he does at this point in the transcript.

Stoa, emerging more or less contemporaneously with the Epicurean school. The Stoic and Epicurean school[s] were the most characteristic schools of the Hellenistic and Roman period. Now some people say that an entirely new type of political thought started with the Stoics, for example, the brothers Carlyle, in their six-volume history of Western thought.[xiii] I cannot go into that. The Stoics went so far as to assert that only the noble is good, i.e., only the moral, we could almost say, is good. Yet they [10][identified] the man of nobility with the wise man, and the wise man must as such possess the "virtues" of logic and physics. In other words, that is much closer to Plato than to Kant. We must beware of mistaking Aristotle's man of moral virtue or good man who is a perfect gentleman for the good man in an ordinary sense, and that would be a man who is just and temperate but lacks all other virtues—in other words, what we call a nice fellow. He is temperate, just, but he doesn't have to be courageous and he doesn't have to be wise, like the members of the lowest class of Plato's *Republic*. This notion of goodness is developed very clearly in the second book of Cicero's *Offices*, for example in paragraph 35, and other examples. I did not know that when I wrote my book on Machiavelli, because Machiavelli makes a distinction between goodness and virtue and I could not understand precisely what Machiavelli meant by that, and I had completely forgotten or never really understood those remarks in Cicero, and [how] Cicero defines it. A good man is a man who has justice and temperance, i.e., those qualities which the members of the lower classes in Plato's *Republic* have, and this notion of goodness we of course all understand when we say very vaguely but rather definitely of a man [that] he is a good man, he is a nice fellow. We have in mind that he is just and temperate, but we do not include courage and wisdom, and that of course is not what Aristotle meant by a good man.

When the philosopher Aristotle addresses his political science to gentlemen, say to more or less perfect gentlemen, he shows to them as far as possible that the way of life of the perfect gentleman points to the philosophic life. He as it were removes the screen which these people themselves could not remove. He articulates for his addressees the unwritten *nomos* which was the limit of their vision, while he himself stands above that limit. He is thus compelled or enabled to correct the gentleman's opinions about the things which fall within their purview. The gentleman is by nature able to be affected by philosophy. Aristotle's political science is an attempt to actualize this potentiality. These people could become aware of something higher than gentlemanship, and to a certain extent and within the limits of the possibility, Aristotle does that. The gentleman affected by philosophy is in the highest case the enlightened statesman, like Pericles, who was affected by the philosopher Anaxagoras. The moral–political sphere is then not unqualifiedly closed to theoretical science. One reason why it seems necessary to make a radical distinction between practical wisdom on the one hand, and the sciences and the arts on the other, was the fact that every art is concerned with a partial good, whereas prudence is concerned with the whole human good.

But now a surprise. The highest form of prudence is the legislative art, which is the architectonic art, as Aristotle calls it, the art of arts, because it deals with the whole human good in the most comprehensive manner. The art by which it is possible to teach legislators, this legislative art is concerned with the whole human good by being

[xiii] R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West* (1903).

concerned with the highest human good with reference to which all partial human goods are good. It deals with the subject in the most comprehensive manner because it establishes a framework within which political prudence proper, statesmanship, can take place. It is an art because, unlike political prudence and prudence proper, it is free from that involvement the dangers of which cannot be averted except by the moral virtues. Hence prudence itself appears to be ultimately subject to an art, not to the vulgar arts but to the art of arts, the legislative art. Considerations like these induced Socrates and Plato to assert that virtue is knowledge and that prudence is philosophy, because every prudence practiced by any individual requires for its full actualization a good society, good law, the work of the legislative art, so that prudence itself depends ultimately on an art which radically understood becomes philosophy. Just as the partial human goods cannot be known to be good except with reference to the highest or the whole human good, the whole human good in its turn cannot be known except with reference to the good simply, what Plato calls the idea of the good, which comes to sight beyond and above all other ideas.

Let me restate that. The human good cannot be known according to Plato except with reference to the good simply, what he called the idea of the good. Hence the idea of the good is the principle from which all prudence and all prudential handling of situations must start. But alas, this highest theme of all wisdom, what Plato calls the idea of the good, is not quite obtainable. No full knowledge of the idea of the good is possible. Hence wisdom is not possible, only love of wisdom: in Greek, philosophy. Hence, for the reason given prudence is a never-to-be-completed concern with one's own good. Now if this is so, how can it ever be known which way of life is the most choiceworthy life? In other words, does not this ultimate inadequacy of wisdom lead to complete practical skepticism? Plato or Socrates know that the philosophic life is the best life. The answer would be this, I believe. There is only one fundamental alternative regarding the good life, and that is the political–practical life or the life devoted to contemplation, [i.e.], the philosophic life.[xiv] And now the contention is that the alternative, namely, the political–practical life, is evidently subordinate to the philosophic life. Political life is evidently life in the cave, to use the Platonic likeness. The city we can also say is the only part of the whole whose essential character can be fully known. It can be fully understood that the political or practical life cannot fulfill man's highest possibility. This explains the difference between Plato and Aristotle.

To remind you of the main point—there are a few other things which I would like to mention—the difficulty is this. For Plato it is clear. For Plato the distinction between prudence and theoretical wisdom is ultimately irrelevant, at least as far as we have seen hitherto, because prudence or practical wisdom has its principle in the idea of the good, the highest theme of theoretical understanding. The sphere of prudence is not closed as it is in Aristotle. It is only another expression to say [that] for Plato there is no moral virtue, there is only vulgar or political virtue, or philosophic or genuine virtue. This intermediate virtue does not exist. The difficulty is created by the fact that Aristotle regards wisdom,

---

[xiv] "Socrates could not know this if he did not know that the only serious alternative to the philosophic life is the political life and that the political life is subordinate to the philosophic life . . . " Strauss, *The City and Man,* 29.

theoretical wisdom, prudence, and the arts as all available. There are artisans, obviously. No one questions that. There are prudent men, men of practical wisdom, including statesmen. There are wise men: there is at least Aristotle, who has found a solution to the fundamental problems of the universe and of man. For Plato, wisdom and prudence become ultimately inseparable and are not available in their perfection. So what you have is really philosophy as the theoretical–practical concern with your own improvement, with your own betterment, with your own virtue, an attempt which can never cease because wisdom is in fact not available. The difficulty in Aristotle himself is this, that Aristotle must in a way admit that while prudence is superior to the arts, there is one art, the highest art, which is superior to prudence: the architectonic art, the legislative art. And this is a kind of necessary concession to the Platonic point of view.

One can make many objections to what I have said, and perfectly justified objections. I will mention only one point. According to this scheme it would seem that the philosopher is identical with the statesman of the highest order. If there is no fundamental distinction between theory and practice, the highest theoretical activity and the highest practical activity must coincide. At the beginning of the dialogue *Sophist*, someone, not Socrates, asserts that the philosopher and the statesman are two entirely different human types.[xv] He says there are three human types: the sophist, the statesman, and the philosopher. Plato wrote a dialogue called the *Sophist* in which he made clear what the sophist is, and then he wrote a dialogue called the *Statesman* in which the speaker, the stranger from Elea, made clear what the statesman is, but he did not write the dialogue the *Philosopher*. So either he died before he could write it or he thought that by understanding the sophist and the statesman we understand the philosopher. That leads to very hard questions into which I cannot go. What I am driving at is that these are only very provisional statements, but I believe one has to consider these points if one wants to go deeper with the argument.

Student: In what sense is the legislative art an art and not merely the highest exercise of prudence?

LS: You mean what the legislator here and now does?

Student: I take it you use legislative art in a fundamental sense.

LS: No, I don't mean to speak of legislators in the sense of congressmen or senators. I mean the man who goes out to found a colony and gives a code to that. Is that what you mean?

Student: Yes. Why isn't that an exercise of political wisdom?

LS: But is he not guided by a higher art? Let us take another example: a general, a first-rate general. He wins a battle. But what does that mean? That is a prudential action, considering his situation, the position of the enemy. But is this also not an application of his art, perhaps a very ingenious application? But is there not a strategic art which can be

[xv] *Sophist* 216a-218c. See Strauss, "Plato," *History of Political Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 32-43.

taught? Not to everyone. No art can be taught to everyone, unless it is a very simple art like—

Student: Would you say that a knowledge of human nature is necessary in order to exercise the legislative art, and that the practitioner of political wisdom must look to the legislative art for this knowledge of human nature in order to perform—

LS: The statesman is dependent on the legislator. That is a very simple thing. Any president of the United States is dependent for all his doings on the Constitution. He can have a certain leeway there, but ultimately he cannot rise higher than his source.

Student: My question was, in what sense are the founders practitioners of legislative art rather than practitioners of political wisdom?

LS: Let us speak of statesmanship and the legislative art on a theoretical level. The statesman is a man who handles individual political situations here and now. The legislator in the old sense is the man who establishes the framework, what we now would call the constitution, but the ancients also meant the specific laws regarding marriage, property, and so on. This is all prudence, because the legislator gives the law for this community here and now. The highest form of prudence, the legislative acts of the highest order, is itself dependent on an art, the architectonic art, the legislative art. Have you ever looked at Plato's *Laws*? The overall impression is that here is a man, a philosopher, who is the teacher of the legislative art, [who] teaches that art to actual[11] [legislators]. This means in the first place that higher than all forms of prudence, including the highest, there is an art.

Student: That art would seem to be wisdom.

LS: Not quite, because it has to do ultimately with producing something, namely, the good social order. But precisely this follows, and take for example Plato's *Laws*, [where it is said] that the teacher of legislators cannot do his job if he does not know the highest principles, that with which the theoretical man is concerned. In a word, the teacher of legislators is a philosopher. In Plato that is very clear. That is what he means by the words "virtue is knowledge." If you think through what everyone means by virtue in everyday life in the most practical sense, you ultimately are driven back to understanding, insight, theoretical understanding of a sort. Aristotle denies that. Aristotle says that a practical science is possible, or as I put it, that the sphere of prudence is in principle closed. That is what he in the main conveys through his two works, the *Ethics* and the *Politics*. But even there, in Aristotle this is not unqualifiedly true. In other words, Aristotle makes practical science as independent of theoretical science as is feasible.

Student: But in Aristotle's point of view, the political scientist or the man of political wisdom must look to a legislative art in the same sense?

LS: Ultimately, yes. When the statesman in what we would now call a constitutional or limited government has to consider and to obey an order which he did not establish, to

that extent he looks up to something, and the quality of his looking up will depend on his understanding the intention of the legislator. But the legislator himself is in fact the practitioner of an art in all cases, Socrates would say, a man who exercises an art while being clearly prudent because he teaches the legislative art. Do you see the point? . . . would say that . . . [xvi] exercised the legislative art by laying down the law for Sparta . . . the man who has learned the true legislative art, that he would say: No, he didn't. He did as well as he could. He was an apprentice and already compelled to produce a shoe fitting Sparta, and the work was what one would expect from an apprentice.

Student: In the last thing with which you were concerned in your argument, you said that for Plato, prudence led to something higher, a legislative art which would in turn lead to something higher which is the truth, while Aristotle wants to—

LS: A ceiling: Aristotle wants to have a ceiling. We could think of the sphere of prudence that way. It is closed, and the ceiling is constituted by the moral virtues, by the ends of the gentleman.

Student: But you were arguing that even with the ceiling, Aristotle was aware that in a larger sense prudence also has a knowledge of the natural ends of man.

LS: You can say that. What I was trying to do was slightly more subtle: first, to bring out as sharp[ly] as I could that this is what Aristotle really does overall, and then to indicate that here and there Aristotle is compelled to question the closedness of the sphere of prudence. But that does not do away with the fact that for most practical purposes it works, and that this is an important lesson for us especially today, where all the pressure is to make political science dependent on theoretical sciences of a kind Aristotle didn't know of, and of a kind of theoretical sciences which make a true understanding of political things altogether impossible. That is our special handicap today, namely, a science modeled on the natural science modern-style which suffers from this fundamental handicap. That, you can say, is the motive behind my insisting. Yes?

Student: . . . if art derives its justification from prudence, and the sphere of prudence ultimately derives its justification from wisdom, how do we know that philosophy is self-contained, that philosophy may not need something higher than itself to justify itself? How do we know that philosophy is really self-contained?

LS: That is only the inner evidence of what philosophy says can answer that question. There cannot be a regress in the infinite, otherwise absolute skepticism, theoretical and practical, follows. Sure, you could say absolute skepticism is in order. Then we would have to discuss it.

Student: In other words, we have to accept it on faith?

[xvi] Strauss might be referring to Lycurgus here.

LS: No, that is the end of philosophy, because philosophy needs to be the quest for evident knowledge. And if the quest for evident knowledge is itself based on something alien—but let us leave it now at your more radical statement, [that] absolute skepticism would follow from that. All right, the only practical and honest way to go about it is to look at absolute skepticism and see whether that is a feasible position. That's an indirect proof as it were for Aristotle, as I believe it would be.

Student: If you accept as the highest art the legislative art in the fundamental sense, i.e., the ability to form a social order—

LS: No, it is an art, not a science, because it is concerned with production. An art is concerned with production. The shoemaker's art is concerned with the production of shoes, the legislator's art with the production of laws or other social institutions, whereas the theoretical sciences are not concerned with production but only with seeing things as they are.

Student: If we accept this analysis and then take into consideration this highest art as practiced by the founders of the Constitution of the United States, how does this tie in with Aristotle's notion of change with regard to the laws? Because granting . . . has to formulate a ratio between condition and—

LS: That is an important but theoretically very secondary question, namely, once such a social order is established, the rule is to preserve it and not to have frequent and especially radical changes.

Student: What about the more fundamental question, which is the actual establishment of a better social order?

LS: Oh, very simple. I use now the Platonic symbolism, but you have to translate it into more reasonable language. Let us assume the good order is that of the *Republic*. Now [in] what the legislator does, he will see that it is absolutely impossible to get people to accept it, people for whom he has to legislate. He says: I will make a concession. In the first place, let them have private property and private families—concessions from the point of view of the letter of the *Republic*. And furthermore, these people come from Sparta or from Crete; they have these and these particular habits, some of them are nice, others of them are not so nice, but I cannot simply legislate away the not-so-nice habits. What will I do? I will strike a compromise: I will restrain these bad habits they have, I will not try to eradicate them. That is a subordinate but important question.

Now I am sorry, but because this is the last meeting, I must add two points. I have of course forgotten or neglected things occurring in the *Politics* which deserve consideration. I would like to turn your attention—and without any thought of the examination; I could almost swear that these two points will not occur in the examination, so no mercenary considerations . . . At the beginning of book 4 is the most elaborate statement of Aristotle on the political art or science, and we should read that carefully. It is also interesting with a view to the question we discussed today: Do we find

at the top a form of prudence or an art? Very important for this question. The other point to which I draw your attention is this in book 4, 1297b37 following. Aristotle makes a distinction between three parts of government: the deliberative, the magistrative, and the judicial. Now this is the root in a way of the most obvious characteristic of the United States Constitution—you know, a legislature, an executive, a judiciary. But all the more important is it to see the difference. Aristotle speaks of the deliberative, not of the legislative, i.e., such things as war and peace, and treaties belong under deliberative and are clearly excluded from the legislative. What is the idea underlying the narrowing of the deliberative to legislative? I believe one can say that all governmental functions, including the actions of the prerogative . . . Locke . . . are to be subject to law in one way or the other.

The second point which one has to consider is that the distinction between these three parts of government is not separation of power[s]. Aristotle is perfectly open to the notion that all three powers might be exercised by the same part, by the same people—not separation of power[s]. And if one wants to understand the crucial difference between Aristotle and the discussion of the Constitution, one has to go back to the theoretical view, in this case the eleventh book in Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*. There Montesquieu makes clear why we need separation of power[s]. And the answer is, and that is very revealing: the security of the individual. This consideration is not as such crucial in Aristotle; he was aware of it somehow, but not as such. Here we see the connection between Montesquieu and the self-preservation/natural right teachers Locke and Hobbes before him.

In this connection, I would like to mention[12] there is an immediate source of Montesquieu's discussion of the English constitution in book 11. [It] is the discussion by Polybius in the sixth book of his[13] [*Histories*, which treat the Roman constitution], and that is also very interesting. The Roman constitution had a kind of separation of powers. Some things are done by the people, others are done by the senate, and others are done by the consuls—the executives, you could say. But if you compare Polybius's presentation of the Roman constitution with Montesquieu's discussion of the English constitution, you see there is a very important theoretical difference. Both are concerned with freedom, Polybius as well as Montesquieu, but Polybius believes he can get this freedom by a division of the sum-total of governmental powers into different parts without a principle guiding the division. As it were, you [14]divide into three chunks, with one chunk to this part, but no principle. In the case of Montesquieu there is a principle: executive, legislative, judiciary. But the discussion of this problem must start and cannot start anywhere else except from this passage in Aristotle where you have the beginning, namely, a distinction of governmental powers as distinguished from a separation of powers.

Now a last word about the purpose of this course. What I wanted to do in this course was to make clear those fundamental concepts of classical political philosophy, especially of Aristotle—and these fundamental concepts were the city, the regime, and the best regime—and to make clear these fundamental concepts means to make clear what these concepts imply. If I can venture to draw any conclusion from this discussion, and at that I

leave it, it is this: the key concept of political science in Aristotle is the concept of the regime. Aristotle's doctrine of the regime becomes specific by his distinction of the six regimes, the three good and the three bad ones, and the various important subdivisions of them, especially of democracy and oligarchy. But the Aristotelian analysis of regimes is not immediately applicable in the details to the analysis of any modern regime, because there is a fundamental difference between all modern political life, especially in our age, between all present-day regimes and the regimes considered by Aristotle. And if we trace this difference back to its principle we come back to this point: that modern thought understands differently than Aristotle the relation between the *demos* and philosophy or science. The modern understanding of the relation between philosophy[15] [or] science and the *demos* leads to two different but connected consequences, (a) technology and (b) ideologies. The characteristic of present-day regimes is that they are regimes in technological societies and in societies possessing ideologies. Without well considering it, we cannot understand any "isms" of our time. But that doesn't do away with the fact that the concept of the regime as the order of society defined in terms of its end and of the human beings akin to that end, and therefore ruling in broad daylight, still is the best clue we have to the analysis of political phenomena. This was my overall intention in this course. Now I am willing to have a brief discussion of about ten more minutes, because at an earlier time I was perceiving that there was an urge on the part of some of you. Yes?

Student: . . . It seems to me from what you have said that there's a possibility that there are going to be two advantages to man, the one being theoretical knowledge and the other being the virtues.

LS: Say moral virtues, because Aristotle also speaks of intellectual virtues.

Student: But in this way you could have a body of good men . . . why virtue is good, and you could have a group of immoral philosophers.

LS: Not immoral. If you would say "transmoral," transmoral would be better because their motivation in their actions would not be moral proper. That you can say. That is exactly the point. Aristotle tries to solve it by showing how in gentlemanship as gentlemanship there lies a possibility of being open to philosophy, of being affected by philosophy. That is the solution which he suggests. And if this is so, there would be a kind of harmony between philosophy and the *polis*, mediated by the gentleman.

Student: In evaluating the regimes, are we to look to the greatest excellence of a particular man, or to a general good quality of life that pervades a large number of men? I've had some difficulty trying to decide in my own mind which of these is superior for Aristotle.

LS: Aristotle would of course think that there is a ruling stratum. That is an extreme case, [the case] of an early monarchy where there would be one absolutely outstanding man. That would not apply to anything later. There would be a considerable part of the population not necessarily in the majority who would be in this sense good. But Aristotle would, I think, take it for granted that if you take goodness, gentlemanship, in any way

seriously, then it will be only a part of the population, say only a minority of the population, can actually have it. But the others can have a deference to it which makes them in their way good men; but they would not be good in themselves, they would be good through deference.

Student: The problem I had in particular was in striking the line between the number who are deferent to this good quality of life and those who actually possess it, who were not deferring to virtue but had actually attained a certain level—

LS: If I may clarify that with a wholly arbitrary numerical statement, say, thirty percent of gentlemen, fifty percent truly deferent, twenty percent compelled by the eighty percent to behave, to give you just an inkling of what I believe he meant.

Student: Could you characterize this difference which you have shown here as the classical theoretical being transmoral, the modern theoretical the difference as beyond good and evil?

LS: Beyond good and evil, no. You mean, what would Machiavelli's position be?

Same student: Yes, I'm trying to think what would be in his sense value-free. What I am trying to ask is about the step from transmoral to immoral. Isn't this the step that has been made?

LS: What would be a legitimate characterization of modern social science—not of the individuals, they are in addition human beings and citizens, but in their capacity as social scientists? Well, I think you would have to say simply amoral. That has to do with the[16] [question]: What are the objects of the theoretical attitude? For Aristotle, it goes without saying that the objects of the theoretical attitude have an order, or to use a term which is not identical with what we mean by moral but it is surely also not amoral: beauty. Resplendence, inner beauty. I will give you an example. When you take a logical positivist, and his chief concern is science, meaning not what is science for but what is scientific method and his procedure and so on, he makes a value judgment without admitting, meaning he does not know that this analysis of science, a strictly descriptive analysis of science, is in fact normative. It excludes pseudoscience as a matter of course, alchemy, astrology, or what have you. Now you must take a further step. There are such philosophical disciplines as ethics or aesthetics, for example. They deal with genuine morality, ethics, as distinguished from a fake morality, and aesthetics is concerned with a true work of art in contradistinction to trash. So these are all necessarily in a way normative pursuits. Philosophy which is concerned with normative subjects, with values, cannot be "amoral" in the sense in which social science is amoral. We had an example on an earlier occasion when I spoke of positivism, for example: culture as a subject of anthropology. That cannot be clarified by anthropology itself; you have to call in philosophy sooner or later to make clear what culture is. Now if you say that culture is a society understood as engaged in a variety of different but related pursuits, such as the law, food production, religion, art, and whatnot, and all these things are understood here in a strictly value-free manner—in other words, they are not in the guiding light of some

norm—that is wholly absent from Aristotle, [and] I should say from any earlier philosophy. I mean, even the materialist doctrines of older times were not free from that. I believe there is no precedent for that. A study claiming to lead to knowledge which is value-free, that is the motive here. I mean, there were skeptics, but they didn't claim they had any science. Today the modern social scientist is not a skeptic, of course. He claims to be a man of science, a man who finds knowledge; he admits the possibility of knowledge and yet says that within the sphere of knowledge no distinction between high and low is possible in any sense. That I believe has no precedent. Skepticism has plenty of precedents, but then skepticism meant that no science is possible. And you must also not forget that from Aristotle's point of view—and as well from Plato's point of view, where it was clearer—that if one can say of philosophy that it is transmoral, then one must say that within the purview of nonphilosophic man, what we call morality—say, justice—is in the ordinary sense of the word still the highest. There is no question about it. You must go beyond that, beyond justice as it is ordinarily understood (in the world?)[xvii] according to Plato, because it is always defective understanding which is frozen for the sake of social stability. Therefore you must go beyond it. But it is surely higher than anything else with which people are concerned, satisfaction of bodily needs and so on. Transmoral is not amoral.

Student: I cannot see why self-preservation of the social order once it is in motion is self-evident. That is, I don't see why justice has to be frozen in order to keep social stability. I think that this would be the height of injustice.

LS: Well, Plato says that every just thing, whether a just man or a just law or just institution, is imperfectly just, i.e., there is always some injustice in it. Let me try to make explicit what you imply. You have a society of imperfect individuals, of imperfect laws. And then you say: We will change this, perhaps not at one stroke, but step by step, in the direction of perfect justice. That is the notion, the modern notion of progress, but it presupposes a lot of things. It presupposes that the change and the movement that goes with the change will be in the right direction. I will give you an example from a different field. I once had a friend who was a legal realist,[xviii] if you know what that is. He was a very intelligent man but given to (strange formulations ?) . . . and he simply . . . what does the law mean? Nothing but what the judge makes of it. And of course the same thing applied to the Constitution. I tried to make clear to him that he was a liberal in the present-day sense of the word. I said, "That is very good from your point of view as long as you can be sure that the judges are more liberal than the legislators, but if, God forbid from your point of view, a situation would arise where the judges are reactionaries, then your only hope would be that the judges are bound by the relative liberalism of the laws

---

[xvii] Parenthetical phrase appears as it is in the original.

[xviii] "Legal realism" encompasses a multiplicity of views, but realists would generally agree that in deciding cases, judges respond primarily to the facts of the case rather than to legal rules and reasons. Many legal realists have been interested in sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of law in order better to determine why a particular judicial decision was made. Famous realist Oliver Wendell Holmes's view of the law was that it was not a coherent system of rules or principles, nor could it be understood in terms of a sovereign power; rather, the law is past decisions plus predictions of what judges in the future will do.

laid down by the legislature." The modern view—this sanguine character, we rise up to the heights of justice—presupposes that on the whole the change is in the right direction. But if we do not know that, if we must reckon with the possibility that the change might as well have a tendency in the wrong direction, then one would say if you have an order which is tolerably decent, which means at best quite a few injustices, then it is better to preserve it than to take chances by changes which might go either directly or indirectly in the opposite direction. In other words, the difference is not incidentally a different estimate of impersonal forces, as we would say, whether the stars or the economic conditions, it doesn't make any difference, fight for the good cause or do not fight for the good cause. I think that what has happened in the last thirty or forty years and what is underlying much of the troubles in social science is an increasing awareness of these extrahuman supports, you know, the circumstances are not so reliable as in the nineteenth century many people believed, partly on the basis of general evolutionism, [that] development from the amoeba to man, and from man will go still higher, or other theories of this kind. Surely one cannot dogmatically establish it because Aristotle says it. That doesn't make it true. That we know. But one must take Aristotle, because his is truly a work about man, as an occasion for making clear why did he have to use terms strange to us, what are the principles, and see or discover the tacit assumptions which we make . . . and then weigh the terms which survive this view.

Student: But doesn't justice contain two things, not only distribution but doing what is right?

LS: But what does that mean? If you go to the South, in [an] entirely preintegration area,[xix] which partly exists as far as I know, you act wrong[ly] if you go into a part reserved for colored people. You are a nice man and a man who does right, and therefore you abet by your action segregation. I assume now for argument's sake that the antisegregation case is good. To act right[ly] means in all cases crudely to obey the law. The disobedience to the law which is in a higher sense justified is always a rare and an extreme case. A decent Southerner believing in segregation would of course not for one moment do wrong to a Negro, meaning robbing him and other things. He would only obey the law. And yet according to the liberal view, he does wrong by obeying the law and by not very actively working for their change.

Student: But isn't then justice just relative if [it is] just used to support society, the social order that exists?

LS: Primarily . . . you must not forget there is always a sphere where the law is silent and where justice in a more subtle sense comes in as a matter of course. May I mention one example in the experiences of justice which are most common to people like myself: to be fair to students. This is not always easy, you know. [17][The law][xx] draws a line between a B- and a C+. But if we are not pedantic and morbid, we will say: Well, we know there is an element of arbitrariness which cannot be eliminated. This I do not mean [by the problem of justice in a more subtle sense]. But if it comes to a question of what we are

[xix] A legally racially-segregated area.
[xx] In the original transcript: "(virtue?)"

supposed to do in the classroom, what our substantive justice is, other things we can say as a matter of course, [and] great divergences of opinion appear. Everyone would say he is doing right in a formal sense, but the substantive thing (he can't judge ?).[xxi] If a man who is very competent in his field [18]can go to a classroom and [19][thinks] on the way from his office to the classroom about the subject of his lecture, and is really competent in his field, talks for fifty minutes or a hundred minutes without stopping, without reconsidering what he said last year in his course, is this a conscientious teacher? Does he do right by his students? That is more subtle

[1] Deleted: "On December 4th you will undergo a written examination in this room and you are supposed to bring a clean book with you, one that has nothing in it, and no books or notes from this course, and there will be in order to protect your virtue against any dangers, there will be a proctor here who will enforce this rule. I am sure this will not be necessary, but it is a kind of reminder that in the extreme case, force will be applied. I will be here to dictate the question, and will be willing to explain the question, if an explanation is needed, within limits. I mean I will not supply an answer to the question in the form of an explanation. You will also have to have a pencil or a pen, in addition to paper. 3:30 to 5:00, in case you want to make an appointment afterward."
[2] Deleted "they"
[3] Deleted "less"
[4] Deleted "that"
[5] Deleted "to"
[6] Deleted "science"
[7] Deleted "and that is"
[8] Deleted "in our sense going"
[9] Deleted "them"
[10] Deleted "defined"
[11] Deleted "philosophers"
[13] Deleted "*History of the Roman Constitution*"
[14] Deleted "take three chunks"
[15] Deleted "and"
[16] Deleted "fact"
[17] Deleted "(virtue?)"
[18] Deleted "and"
[19] Deleted "thought"

[xxi] The parenthetical phrase appears in original transcript, evidently the transcriber's guess as to what Strauss said.